

ALORA CARTER



THE AWAKENED PRINCE

ONCE UPON A PRINCE



A SLEEPING BEAUTY RETELLING

THE
AWAKENED
PRINCE

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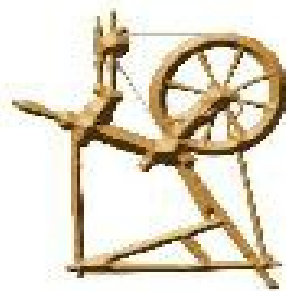
The Winter Prince by Constance Lopez

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Book Cover by Moor Books Designs

To my husband, the most enduring soul. Despite every setback and every kick while you were knocked down, you got up and fought through it. Thank you for teaching me to be resilient.

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Also By Alora Carter

Author's Note:

There is another language written here, the translations are in the back for your entertainment, and if you are like me, and don't want to be left out of the conversation. More details, including the dictionary can be found at my website: AloraCarter.com.

There are no great trigger warnings for this book: It has scenes of battles with thorns, shadows, and goblins. No animal harm is described. A mother dies in the past, as described in a recollection. Sweet romance with kisses only. Long epic names come with nicknames for easy use. A gentle tease to epic names definitely intended.

Enjoy!



CHAPTER 1

Prologue

The humans were split: east and west,
Divided by hate and prejudice,
Until the goblins attacked from on high.
Unite and defend, or their kingdoms would die.

All hope was lost as the horde advanced on.
The cities were taken, resistance near gone.
Then, from the north, the fairies descended,
Riding great beasts, they slew and defended.

The people emboldened, pressed back and they killed,
Pushing goblins toward forests and desolate hills.
The wall was erected to keep evil at bay,
The sunlight burned hot, and peace reigned that day.

The fairies crowned kings, and the ancients withdrew,
The countries once separate, now reeling, they knew,
The only way was to be forever united
But discussions were hard, and passions ignited.

Now only the friendship of princes gave hope,
That one day, when kings, their unity would grow.
Now married with children, a betrothal they planned.
The prince and the princess would save the whole land.

CHAPTER 2

Discussions

Killian

He had prepared for this. Killian straightened his quill, shifted his parchment, and pulled back his shoulders, always sure to keep his face stoic but polite. He swallowed back the nerves that were clambering up his throat, reminding him of what had happened last time. But today would be different. Today, his father would call on him to speak. The gentle murmurs of the nobles buzzed around him, indiscernible as he read through his proposal again. His hand trembled with each beat of his heart against his rib cage.

The scrape of the opening door brought everyone to their feet as King Harolt strode into the room. His boots boomed across the wooden floor to the large table where the nobles had gathered. He took his time, surveying the group of advisors. The servants stood frozen, barely breathing from their places along the walls. With a nod, he took his seat, and the rest followed with the susurrus of fine clothes and the squeak of chairs.

“Thank you all for joining me on such short notice to address the drought threatening Norwood’s upcoming harvest. Reports claim Acacia suffers the same, with wildfires taking hold on the other side of the Spires. We meet to solve this problem today.” His father—the king—raised his glass. “I come to serve the people.”

Killian and the nobles raised their own goblets, replying as one, “We come to serve the king.”

They all drank.

Killian’s heart rate ratcheted, pulsing in his ears. He leaned forward and set his hand beside his prepared notes, waiting for his opportunity.

His father examined the nobles, his gaze finally drifting to Killian. Their eyes met. Killian swallowed to moisten his mouth, ready to speak.

His father scratched just below his crown and turned away. “Lord Farsha, what is your report from the west of Norwood?” The king’s gaze flicked to the elderly man at the end. Lord Farsha hesitated and cast a furrowed glance at Killian before he pushed on the table’s edge to stand on rickety legs.

Killian blinked. Perhaps ... perhaps his father had forgotten? But he had promised. They had discussed it only two days ago. Killian’s thoughts raced as Lord Farsha spoke. He knew what the lord was going to say, he had asked him himself. Killian had done the research. He had the numbers stained in black on the papers before him. He had come up with a plan already. He had been prepared to present the solution.

Perhaps it was a test. A test of ... patience?

Killian straightened his spine, staring at his father’s bearded face and listening distantly to the reports the nobles lay before the king. Reports that should have been Killian’s to share.

Killian shifted his papers so his plan for the crisis was on top. He was ready to contribute several solutions to the problems the kingdom of Norwood was currently facing. But his father never looked back at him. Ideas from others were thrown out, but when Killian opened his lips to share his own, his father lifted a single finger from the table and shook his head, never glancing over. The message was clear. And it was for Killian alone.

It was all he could do not to slouch under the disappointment.

“Very good.” His father stood, casting back the chair behind him a few feet. “Lord Ryker will be sent as ambassador to the Isle, while Lord Farsha will concentrate on drought improvements. Let’s get this wrapped up quickly, gentlemen. The prince’s wedding approaches, which makes this discussion almost fruitless. In two months, his marriage will save us all. But until then, the people are hungry.” He cleared his throat. “We’ll meet again in three days.”

Then the king turned to leave. Killian's mouth dropped open to protest, but the king had already swept out the door. Ignored again. Looked over again. Everything rested on a betrothal and some old, alleged magic. But Killian had a plan. Yet the king still left before he let Killian speak, or lead ... or even try.

How could Killian fix the past when the king suffocated every opportunity? Killian dragged a hand down his face before dropping his forehead to his fist. Again and again, Killian tried. And sure, he had failed before, but ...

He shook his head. Perhaps that's all he could do—he could only fail.

Killian's hand clenched the useless parchment as he glared daggers up at the massive portrait hung in the middle of the room across from him. A childish face peered back, round eyes wide with what was certainly terror as he held a tiny pink swaddled newborn. A portrait of the then three-year-old prince's betrothal to that very infant.

Killian was certain his place at the table was deliberately across from the portrait to press on him during meetings and beat into him the whole purpose of his existence. A marriage. His marriage. *The marriage* that would finally unite the countries and solve all the world's problems. The moment of his cursed contract captured in oil, as solid and unbending as stone. His father's ultimate plan for Killian's life and their country's future happiness.

Long live the king.

In a fury, Killian gathered his things, kicked back from the table, and stalked out of the room.

Killian roared as he slammed his sword repeatedly against his opponent's, his mind whirling as fast as his weapon. *Clash*. The king. *Clash*. Struggling harvests. *Clash*. Failure. *Clash*. His father. *Clash*. Each strike was a desperate attempt to unburden himself from the many frustrations of his princely life. Thankfully, Phineas could take it. The hulking man parried every blow with a swiftness that should have been impossible for someone so massive. His size, however, certainly contributed to the vibration of Killian's bones when Phineas struck back. Killian slipped, throwing his weight on his heels as his friend dodged around the training arena and then pressed forward.

Killian spun and tried to feint, but Phineas anticipated it and blocked before retorting with his own thrusts. Phineas hammered him backward incessantly until he knocked Killian onto his backside with a swipe of his leg. Killian was an excellent fighter, the best in the whole army—except for one. He could never beat his best friend.

Brushing aside the cold metal on his neck, Killian sat up and threw his weapon to the ground, wishing for half the bulk that Phineas carried so easily. “Overmuscled cheater.”

“Hyper-expressive loser.” Phineas winked as he sheathed the practice sword. “Don't give hints. Stop flinching when you're struck. It's not a surprise. Take the hit and hit back.”

Killian glared at Phineas's offered hand before taking it. Phineas flung him to his feet. Rubbing the back of his head, Killian stalked away from the field, bending briefly to snatch up his own sword. Thankfully, they were in a blocked-off part of the arena, so his men couldn't watch his embarrassment.

“Just once, you could lose,” Killian muttered as they entered the field armory.

Pursing his lips, Phineas passed his sword to the weapon master's apprentice, a boy of twelve, before taking Killian's and handing that over too. “It would just inflate your already oversized head.” The boy's eyes widened at Phineas's words. Phineas blinked and corrected himself. “Uh ... I mean, your royal head, Your Highness ... sir.”

Killian snorted as he crossed his arms dismissively. Lord Phineas, the son of the highest-ranking noble family in Norwood and second only to Killian in the army, had been a part of Killian's earliest memories. Beside Killian during tutoring and

training, he had been a key participant in all the mischief that Killian could conjure. Killian loved him like a brother, even if his father did regularly threaten to make Phineas his heir. Phineas was the only person who treated him like a human and not a prince. Sometimes that blessing was mixed.

As they walked back to the archery field, Phineas nudged Killian with his shoulder. “You are a particularly sore loser today, my friend. What’s going on?”

“The usual.”

Phineas winced, as if weighing his next words. “You’ve been struggling more and more lately. Today seems ... worse ...”

“It’s just ...” Killian slapped his gloves into the other palm. “I’m never going to be good enough for him. I snatched that trade deal with the fishermen a couple months ago, we squelched that rebellion along the coastline, but it’s like he’ll never let go of that failed rent issue up north or the debacle with Tallen.” Killian swallowed, shoving his thoughts in another direction from his failed negotiations with that distant nation. “I’m doing everything he wants, but he’ll never trust me again. How can I be king if he keeps me silent?” Killian huffed, his chest heaving. “He treats me like my only contribution to this kingdom is my marriage contract.”

Phineas reached for one of the bows before bending it to catch the bowstring. “I thought you said the king was going to let you lead the meeting this morning?”

“He said he would.” Killian passed Phineas an arrow. He laced his own bow, then aimed. “He changed his mind, apparently. Again. I had the proposal ready and everything.” Killian released the string, and the arrow went wide, missing the target completely.

Phineas sucked a breath through clenched teeth. “You’ve spent days working on that.”

“I’m just another nice little trade agreement. I’m only good to him obedient and quiet and marriageable. ‘The magic will fix it all.’ Bah. Probably just some excuse. I’ve never seen magic ...”

Phineas shook his head, all mirth lost. “Don’t get lost, my friend. You know you’re more than a contract. And magic, well—”

“I’m the prince. I should be training to be king, but he won’t move past the past.” Killian shrugged. “Why keep trying? I’ll just marry that princess and let her lead the country, I guess. That is, if she exists.”

With a frown, Phineas turned to him fully. “Of course she exists.”

“Allegedly.”

“There are portraits. Her parents are friends of your father. I’m sure they know—”

“She hasn’t been seen or heard from since she was a *newborn*—immediately after that cursed portrait.” Killian’s mouth filled with a bitter taste. “Whatever.” He huffed out a breath, drowning in resignation, his heart suffocated into a state of desolation. “He won’t let me in.” Killian kicked a rock into the archery field. “Why keep me as heir at all if he hates me so much?”

Phineas sighed, clearly frustrated. “Killian, your mother wished for this betrothal too. Don’t give up on your father. I’m sure he has his reasons for all of this—maybe it’s part of a plan to train you. Furthermore, the rest of us see what you’re doing ...” He studied Killian before reaching for Killian’s bow. “You need a break to clear your head.” He tilted his head toward the stables. “Go for a ride. I’ll cover for you.”

Killian tapped his fingers on the top of the rail. “But ...”

“Just take Jax with you.”

Nodding, Killian walloped his friend on the shoulder. “As if I could escape that old hound.” He took a few steps before turning back and watching Phineas sink another arrow in the center circle of the target. “Thanks, Phin.”

Phineas wagged his eyebrows. “Come back less prickly.”

Rolling his eyes, Killian turned, snatched a thick blue cloak, and led a saddled mare into the southern meadow.

The horse required little encouragement before she galloped at full speed through the tall whispering grasses. The acreage around the castle to the south had always been free and open grasslands, and the people, superstitious and afraid of the spires, built the village to the north. Killian never minded the vast and free expanse. Gentle hills rose and fell with clusters of trees and a small meandering creek. Most days he found it beautiful.

The early fall wind cut through Killian's dark brown locks as they surged over a fallen tree. But even the wind couldn't whisk off his frustration. Why couldn't his father see that he was trying? Killian knew he could handle more. He could lead more. But every small win as a leader was always overshadowed by his failed attempts and political embarrassments. If only he had worked harder to learn Tallenish all those years ago ... then maybe? Killian shook his head. Even so, he could be a good king. He had great plans and ideas that didn't rely on superstition and magic curses and a princess who would save them all. Anyway, she was a princess, not a sorceress. Why couldn't he help his dry, famished kingdom through more conventional means? Killian had at least five ideas that would bring in trade to help during the very normal, very unmagical drought. They wouldn't have to rely on some distant magic fairy promise.

But his father would never see reason. He never saw all Killian was doing. Why continue to put himself out there if he was nothing more than a bargaining chip or an ingredient for a magic spell? He was the eye of newt needed to cure the supposed curse on the land. Or at least, his marriage was.

Stupid contracts.

Stupid fathers.

He pushed the horse harder, but all too soon, the other side of the meadow ended at the huge pine forest, and he had to pull on his horse to slow. The mare heaved massive breaths as she walked slowly along the impassible wall of trees near the gate.

He had passed this gate so many times as he was growing up that he almost skipped it in mindless inattention. The southern edge of the kingdom was sealed as ever. Beyond the forest, an impassible mountain range stood, its tall spires dark as a storm. As he moved to pass, something pulled him to a stop. His attention fixed on the crusty metal and blackened rot. He felt a pull to touch it but only clenched his fingers more firmly around the leather reins.

Crossing the gate was forbidden to everyone, and especially the prince. One of the many rules about some old curse or other old contract. Nothing but another weighted chain designed to control him. He closed his eyes, fighting the draw of temptation. He was a prince, dutiful and faithful to the role. He shook his head and pressed his legs to push the horse on toward the eastern pasture, but again something tugged at his chest, and he turned.

The gate was enormous, arching, and ancient. Thick vines seized the iron bars and held fast to the black, twisted hinges. The grass stopped a few feet away, exposing cracked earth as it approached the base of the threshold. Beyond the gate and on each side of the entrance were impossibly large pines and impenetrable brush that reached and snagged around the sharp iron fencing. The sweet sunny heat of the meadow was now sliced by an icy breeze laced with an acrid and putrid scent that pulled through the gate. The air felt ... *wrong*.

Despite this, he hopped off the horse and halfheartedly tied the reins to a nearby branch. Reaching a hand toward the gate handle, his chest lurched with a frisson of nerves, and he stepped back. But that tug in his chest pulled again, wooing him ... toward the gate ... toward breaking the law.

He glanced behind him to the high towers of the castle that rose high above the northern tree-covered hill. He could almost see his father's office window from here. That office would one day be his, to lead the kingdom that would also be his if he

were ever allowed to take up the mantle of leadership. His lip curled in ire, and he whirled back to the dark entrance.

This gate was in Norwood—his land. And as prince of Norwood, this was his gate. Therefore, he deserved to know what was on the other side. He could handle anything it threw at him.

A moment later, his sword cut through the vines and ripped their long wrapping strands from their heights with successive snaps. The forbidden act sent a thrill of adrenaline and excitement through him. Maybe here, he could show his mettle.

Behind him, his horse shifted with an anxious whinny.

What in the thorny marshes are you doing? A deep, rumbling voice reverberated in Killian's mind. He had long since stopped jumping at the wolf's sudden appearance and intrusion into his thoughts. Much like Phineas, the wolf had been around through Killian's childhood, somehow always arriving just in time to bear witness and contribute to Killian's mischief.

"Hey Jax." Killian glanced over before tearing at another vine. The horse-sized wolf sat down beside him, his inky black coat only interrupted by electric green eyes that stood as high as Killian's. His shoulders came up to Killian's chest and lowered only a few inches as he sat back on his haunches. Jax licked his lips with a fast flip of his tail as he watched Killian's progress.

The mare stared wide-eyed before she yanked out of Killian's loose knots and raced back toward the castle. Killian sighed. Apparently, he'd be walking back today. Unless ... He glanced at the wolf.

Don't even think about it. I'm not your pony.

Killian chuckled.

By the smell of your excitement, this is going to be stupid. And you thought to go by yourself? He looked around before he shook his whole body as if to prepare. *So where are we going? And where are your human supplies? Food stores? No matter. I shall hunt for you.*

Killian rolled his eyes. "I'm not running away, Jax."

You are running ... toward something?

"Kind of."

Hmm. The wolf shook his head and stretched out his back legs a few times. *I'm a good runner either way.*

The latch turned, but the gate held taut, so Killian had to pull it with his whole weight. The roughened weathered handle bit into his palms as the gate resisted. A low moan seeped from the slight opening. Jax clenched his teeth around Killian's cloak and belt, yanking backward jerkily and nearly suspending Killian in the air. The hinges screeched, an icy wind screamed past, and all at once, the remaining small vines snapped. The gate heaved open, sending the unbalanced prince and wolf sprawling hard onto the dry ground.

"Ow. Sorry, Jax."

Humans have the pointiest extremities. Gangly featherless storks. The wolf snorted and huffed a breath. *You are naught but a starved, skeletal deer. You need more meat.*

Killian nodded at Jax's usual complaints against his humanity, but his attention was fixed on the opening. The other side of the gate was nearly pitch black and absorbed any sunlight that might otherwise have shone down on his back. A harrowing wind whistled. The forest floor that he could see just past the entrance was a bed of blackened pine needles and sparse of any other growth. Within mere feet, everything disappeared in sappy, inky shadows. He glanced behind him. The meadow glittered as bright and peaceful as before.

Goosebumps prickled Killian's skin. The world on the other side of the gate seemed held in tension, and a deep sense of foreboding filled his veins. Killian stepped back but felt the tug in his chest again, coaxing him forward into the darkness.

Jax lifted his snout. *Smells okay.*

“If you say so.” The wind bit his cheeks again, and Killian felt foolish. He was a prince, not a child. He had things to do. Princely, responsible things. He should turn back. He was supposed to uphold the laws of—

The wolf used his massive head and shoved Killian across the threshold.

The silence of the forest acted like a physical force, similar to jumping deep into a lake—silent and suppressive. The light was hazy, but not pitch black, yet the boughs above let no beams of light through to the forest floor. No bird sang. No squirrel shuffled. The wind from the other side was completely absent. The whole forest felt muffled, but more like a blanket than a dangerous presence. His sense of doom lightened a fraction. Piney, earthen scents drifted up from the forest floor.

It was too quiet. “Eerie,” Killian muttered as he set his hand on the pommel of his sword.

Jax paced after him, his nose constantly twitching as he explored the world by scent. *A bit. Still smells okay. No death. You need a better nose.*

The prince rolled his eyes at the wolf who had tried from Killian’s youth to make him more wolf-like. His attempts had—to Jax’s great disappointment—failed. Killian was still fully human.

The wolf padded ahead, scratching intermittently at the blackened soil. Turning back, his tongue lolled out of his mouth in a feral grin. *Come on. Let’s explore. I haven’t felt this much magic in decades.*

“We can’t be too long. I have that ball tonight. In fact, maybe we should head back. We can’t risk getting lost.” Killian’s nail picked at the tip of the pommel.

Seeing through his cowardice, the wolf blinked disdainfully. Padding to the edge of the path, Jax lifted his leg and marked a tree. *Now we won’t get lost. Let’s go.*

“Right.” He cleared his throat. “Well, at least, you could smell our way out.” Without any other excuses, Killian stepped ahead. Signs of an old path faded as the trees grew more thickly. He had never seen a forest so dense that no sky was visible through the limbs. The forest floor around them was an endless array of warm pine needles, soft to step on and mostly quiet. As they moved deeper into the forest, Killian couldn’t avoid the minute clicks of the needles as they broke beneath his weight. He ignored the wolf’s repeated glances and frustrated huffing at his noisy steps.

The wolf’s ears pricked, and he leaned his nose forward, sniffing.

Can you hear it? The magic ...

Killian strained and listened, but he couldn’t hear anything besides his own breathing and the susurrus of his clothing.

Ahead, a single strand of light as wide as Killian’s two palms together, pierced through the forest canopy to the floor below. Motes of dust lifted and shifted through the solid beam. Like sunlight breaking through a thunderous cloud, the light was nearly blinding amid the darkened, shadowed pines. Killian’s skin prickled as he approached and slipped around it, choosing the shadows at first. But surely, it was only light, right? In a fit of impulse, Killian stuck his hand straight into the beam.

The light froze his hand in place as if trapping it in a solid trunk of wood as tingles surged up his arm and through his body. In a moment, a thousand memories from Killian’s childhood flashed in random order through his mind. His mother’s sacrifice. The battle with Phineas at ten. His father’s rant after last year’s tournament. His public embarrassment. The horse’s broken ankle in the race. Tallen’s ambassadors storming out and the choking disappointment of his father. Zalina’s friendship. His mother’s soft caress as she pushed back his hair. Phineas’s encompassing hug.

Killian tugged at his hand as his panic ratcheted, and then, as fast as it had started, the images ceased, and the light released him. Killian ripped away and stumbled to the ground, crawling away from the beam. “That light is magic?”

The wolf frowned before dipping his head in and out of the light. Easily. He trotted beside Killian and sniffed him.

You look unwell.

“It didn’t affect you?”

No? What happened?

“I don’t know. I saw my whole life. I was stuck in that light. I—”

Oh. Jax eyed the light with raised brows. *Oops, I see it now.* The wolf shook his head. *Well, you passed. So that’s good.*

“What is it?”

The Piercing Discernment.

Killian snorted. “You made that up.”

I am ancient and wise. Jax tugged at Killian’s collar from the back, coaxing him to rise. *And also, yes, I did make the name up. But I’m sure it was something like that. My mother could have explained it better, were she still here. We’ll just pretend that I’m right because I probably am. Come. Stand up. You’re all right.*

Killian found his legs and struggled upward as his whole body tingled like waking from sleep. “What would have happened if I hadn’t passed?”

What happens to parchment in the fire?

Killian swallowed hard. “And what exactly did I pass?”

But ahead, a high lilting sound had finally reached Killian’s weak human ears. After a final once-over, Jax prowled forward in the direction of the song. Before them, ten-foot-tall deciduous bushes stood in a line like a wall with tiny beams of bright yellow light visible between the leaves. Killian paused only a moment before he shoved through the boughs.

Once on the other side, his jaw dropped. The bushes broke their line revealing a massive clearing. In the center of the meadow, a woman sang, surrounded by rabbits, mink, jays, herons, hawks, foxes, a massive elk and an even larger brown bear with her two cubs. The woman knit while she sang, the impossibly purple yarn scattered in a chaotic pile around her billowing white dress. The wind swept a few dry leaves around them, in cadence with the music. A lyre sat untouched beside her.

Her singing should have been magic for all it enraptured Killian. He gazed at the long blonde hair falling like rays of sunlight down her back. Before he could think twice, he broke the rest of the way through the brush. The woman turned to him, cutting off her song, and the birds all took off in a sudden, screeching flight. The small furry creatures ducked down into the grass and held still, frozen.

Her face was lovely.

Her expression was terrified.

The enormous bear and the bull elk moved to either side of the woman, the bear’s teeth bared and the elk’s antlers glimmering in a fierce display.

He took a step back, raising his hands up in innocence. “H-hello. I am Killian. I heard your song.” He winced at his stutter and added a charming smile to smooth it over.

The woman’s brows collapsed, bewildered, and she rose, her shoulders pushed forward much like the bear. “Titu bet ra?”

The bear growled and took a step forward. She was larger than any Killian had seen outside the forest. Jax leapt from the bush and landed between them, teeth flashing, to square off against the other creatures.

Her lips popped open, and her features softened. “Hep.” She gestured toward the bear who settled back onto her large haunches. The woman brought her hands together above her head like a prayer before she bent in a deep bow from the waist. As she straightened, she approached Jax, and extended the back of her hand toward his muzzle.

“Shaana honte’aco, treka pa e’lonmar, tros shusha huh u ranarana maneta?”

“Jax, what is she saying?” Killian whispered.

I ... I haven’t heard this language in a long time. My mother spoke it, but I don’t remember its meaning. I can feel it, though, and almost see the words like a picture. She is welcoming me. Asking ... asking why, I think. Yes, it feels like why

and forest. Jax stepped forward and sniffed her hand. *I like her.* The woman's lips broke into a large smile.

Killian's heart stuttered, and he stepped forward, exuding the confidence trained into him from court. He brought his hand to his chest. "Killian." He pointed to the wolf. "Jax." He extended his hand toward her. "And you?"

She raised a wry brow before she turned from him and gathered her supplies. She shook her head, her brows pressed together as she packed a small shoulder bag, then began to walk away.

"Wait!" Killian reached for her.

Prince, stop! Jax stepped in front of him.

The bear roared and leapt onto her two back feet. Her teeth were as long as Killian's fingers and she would have towered a few feet taller than Phineas.

"Na Lomai'tas tarat ra slit'at. Ritun ra hassinah'tas hi. E'otu shum bet Kak." The woman hesitated, her mouth halfway open and her brows tightly together. "Na olit shupet delam'aco. Ra bet'tas bet hi. N'olitsha." As she turned, the bear growled and shook her jowls toward the sky. She turned back to face Jax. "Ra, Shaana honte'aco, noma onk."

Jax blinked before bowing his head. Then, stepping to the side, he tilted his head toward Killian. *I think your time is up. And I'm not staying without you. We should go.*

"But—" Killian was torn. He was standing before the most gorgeous woman he had ever seen. And she was being protected by the scariest bear he had ever seen. He desperately wanted to know more. This forest was supposed to be cursed. Empty. Evil. She seemed anything but. Jax nudged him in the gut, shoving him back a pace. Killian called out, "I'll be back tomorrow!"

With a whistle more birdlike than human, she called the rest of the animals to her. As the company disappeared into the trees ahead of her, she looked back, holding his gaze—holding his heartbeat. Then, as she turned, it was as if she released him. His breath slipped out in a rush. Pawing at the dirt once, the elk stared at Killian before following the woman through the brush. Only the bear remained, her cubs already stumbling after the woman's heels.

Prince. Now.

Killian huffed and whirled, ducking back through the brush into the pine forest. "Fine, Jax. But I *am* coming back."

The wolf paced beside him through the bushes and the tall pines. *As you said.*

"And I'm going to find her."

An unwise decision.

"And we are going to talk."

Despite a language barrier and a bear barrier.

"Just watch me."

With a breath of a barking laugh, the wolf glanced up at Killian. *Oh, trust me. I mean to.*

CHAPTER 3

Peacekeeping

Raela

Raelametanashi whipped through the forest, her mind whirling between shock, excitement, terror, and foundationally, confusion. The trees bent their branches out of her way to avoid hitting her face, and the rabbits knew better than to slip under her footfalls. The wind wrapped her in its embrace, surging with her emotions and sweeping through her hair—its attempt to cool her agitation.

A stranger in their forest. One whose hair was only slightly lighter than onyx, with a rectangular head and a fuzzy (dirty?) lower face. Whose skin was the color of the light, muddy sandstone. Was this a man? She had never seen one before.

Light pierced through the trees and blazed onto her path. She sidestepped it. “I don’t want to talk to you. You let him in.” Another beam, this one even wider, blocked the path. Raela stopped short. “You’re supposed to guard and protect us!” As the light surged before her, she could feel it begging for her attention, and she huffed. “Fine. Show me.” She stepped into its rays.

The forest faded in an indistinct haze as the light filled her soul and mind. The light brought joy and warmth and was blinding in its intensity. She thought of the man, and the light responded with images and sentiments that were not her own. She saw glimpses of what the light had seen in him as a small child, then a boy, and finally, a man—the glimpses came almost too fast to comprehend. The light exuded an earnest feeling, trying to convince her of the reasons it had chosen to let him pass. She saw a mother’s love, a father’s pride, the trust of friendship.

The vision shifted. In front of a wall of light, the silhouette of a man strode in. Light shone in the center of his chest, caged and restrained but clear. The beam of light around her heated, nudging her mind.

She gestured at the caged heart before her. “So, he’s not evil, but he’s also not right. Look at his soul.”

A shadowed woman approached the man. Raela frowned. She knew the shadow was her. The woman took the man’s hand, and the cage around him burst, releasing the brilliance ... and nearly blinding her. Raela shielded her eyes and dashed out from the beam. “Nope. Not happening.”

The light chased after her, licking at her heels as she stormed toward the grassy area near the cottage. “I don’t know what you think you know, but I will not be touching him.” The beam flicked ahead and blocked the path surrounding her, forcing her to step into it again. Her own shadow-self was suspended in the middle of the beam. A bright blushing pink light pulsed from the center of her chest. But as she watched, it began fading with each pulse until it barely flickered at all, and the silhouetted woman started to stumble. She fell to the ground where she lay unmoving. The shadow man approached, his heart uncaged as he reached for the collapsed woman.

Raela glared and stepped again through the beam, unwilling to see anymore. “My light is fine. Thanks.” The light heated and pulsed angrily, slightly searing her hand. She felt it begging her to look again. Gathering her breath, Raela let out a slow exhale, relaxing her shoulders. “Okay. I’ll ... consider what you said. Thank you for showing me.” The light pulsed once more, as if to stomp rather than say a farewell, then it disappeared, leaving the forest darker in its wake.

Raela shook her head as she hurried home. The light had never been so pushy before. The man was disrupting the forest. Having an ancient wolf with him—as she had her bear and her aunties had their elk—proved he wasn’t wholly evil, but was he magical too? The light hadn’t indicated one way or the other. Maybe the wolf owned the man. Or owed him a life debt. Ancients were picky. Raela shrugged to the wind, which tugged on her hair. Some mysteries weren’t meant to be solved.

As Raela burst through the cottage door, her auntie screeched and tossed her cupful of almond flour into the air. “Raelametanashi, what is in your head? Are you the storm? Are you the wind? No!” Her auntie waved the now empty cup at her as she yelled. She was perched precariously on her three-step stool beside the table, yet she still barely met Raela at eye

level. Her salt-and-pepper hair curled around her round, pink-cheeked face. The wrinkles on her eyes and mouth were lined with a coating of flour that drifted from above her. Raela restrained a smile as it sifted over the shoulders of her auntie's rough cotton dress like snow.

She reached a hand to brush off one side of her auntie, schooling her features to look more contrite. "Ach, Auntie, I'm sorry. I just—"

"On the day we honor Auntie Shourentameta'il, no less. And now you have nearly ruined the cake! Pass that bag, young lady."

Raela ducked her head under her auntie's swinging arm as she pointed. Reaching for the small canvas bag of almond flour, she passed it over. "Yes, Auntie Mo."

"Do not dishonor your aunties with your laziness. Say the whole prayer."

"Yes, Auntie Motukalatabeli."

She lowered the spoon she'd been threatening Raela with. "Better. Your Auntie Torulonmana'at is getting straw. She says the roof leaked last night." Raela opened her mouth to mention the man she had seen, but her auntie shook a wooden spoon at her, more like a weapon than a stirring device. "Ah-ah, no talking back now. Get the handkerchiefs ready for her. You know how she is on this day."

Raela did. Auntie Toru would be a walking puddle today—the day they remembered and honored the third sister, Auntie Shourentameta'il, who had disappeared years before. Her aunties said that she would be back any day now, but it had been almost eleven years and she hadn't returned. The familiar wave of guilt caused Raela's throat to constrict.

Raela had only been seven, so the memories of her auntie were not as sharp as she wished, but she could still see Auntie Shou's enormous smile, feel her hugs, and hear her singing. She remembered how her auntie's mischief always got them both into trouble with Auntie Mo.

She loved her other two aunties, really, she did. But with one bossy and one morose, Raela missed the lightness and laughter of Auntie Shou—ach, Shourentameta'il, she corrected herself. Auntie Mo was right. Today of all days was the day to say her whole name—to pray the facets of her character.

Raela set stacks of facial cloths throughout the main room, using a dampened one to help Auntie Mo clean up the mess of flour. Her auntie bustled down from her stool, grabbed the nearest cookbook, and set the book flat on Raela's head. She was always strict with her lessons on grace and balance. Auntie Mo pushed her stool to the cupboards, struggling on tiptoes to reach the shelf above the window. Smoothly rising, Raela grabbed the sugar for her auntie.

"Oh, to have legs like trees!" Auntie Mo exclaimed. "Instead, the Spirit made me look like a stack of bread rolls." She sighed. "No matter. Each body to its purpose. You must be needed to clean the dust and rafters." Auntie Mo tossed the feather duster toward Raela from the counter. "Yes, indeed."

Raela huffed a laugh as she began to clean. Subtlety was not one of Auntie Mo's strengths. As she dusted the cabinets and shelves, the door burst open behind her revealing a walking cluster of grass pushing through the doorway.

Auntie Mo screeched. "Torulonmana'at, do *not* bring that in here. Don't you dare!"

Raela gaped at the door. Billowing straw, four feet tall, towered above the two tiny legs of her auntie. The woman's dress snagged on the grasses and piled up in the front, baring her spindly calves and falling stockings. Her small arms barely reached around the bunch, her arthritic joints pale from the force of her clasping. Behind the grasses, a muffled and warbly voice whined, "But why not? Where shall I place them, then?" Auntie Toru shuffled in a step and wailed, "It's *windy* outside!"

Auntie Mo gestured to the table, though Auntie Toru couldn't see it. "I'm cooking!"

"Aw, Momo..."

Auntie Mo whipped out her threatening spoon again. “Don’t you Momo me. Get out!”

“Don’t yell.” Auntie Toru sniffed. “Not today.” The grasses shook with her hiccupping, exaggerated sobs, shivering like a baby snake’s rattle. Auntie Mo cast Raela an exasperated glance.

Nodding, Raela slipped beside Auntie Toru, reaching down to set her hand on the woman’s bony shoulder. “Come on, Auntie, let’s go get that roof fixed. The bramblebushes will help protect these from the wind while we work.”

Auntie Toru shuffled backward, waving the grasses above her as she struggled out the door. Bits of straw scraped the frame and fluttered to the threshold. Raela would be sweeping that up later. Auntie Toru nodded her head against the stalks. “The wind likes you, Raela. Why can’t the wind like me too. I’m a nice lady.”

“You are, Auntie. The nicest.”

Finally freed from the small doorway, they turned toward the back of the cottage. Raela heard Auntie Mo mutter, “For someone who should know things, she’s as thick as those very stones ...”

Raela reached up and shuffled the grasses with her fingertips so that Auntie Toru wouldn’t hear, then she reached out with her magic, and the wind followed behind, scooting discarded pieces of grass that had fallen from Auntie Toru’s arms and pushing them forward to keep up with their steps. Raela smiled and whispered to the wind, “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. Thank you for noticing my hard work!” Auntie Toru dumped the pile beside the thick bramblebushes that lined the southern edge, revealing her waifish form. Taller than Auntie Mo, she still only stood just above Raela’s elbow. Her sweet, little aunties. Auntie Toru brushed her hands over the stack. “At least *someone* acknowledges my contributions to our home. At least *someone* thanks me. At least—”

“Where was the leak?” Raela asked, trying to divert her auntie from her ruminating.

“It was ... It ...” Her eyes filled with tears. *Oh no*. Raela braced herself. *Diversion failed*. “It was over her roooooooooooooom.” Auntie Toru wailed and clasped her knobby fingers against her lids. Water now poured from them in impossible rivulets.

“There, there, Auntie.” Raela patted her pockets but found she had left her tissues inside. “Ach.” Small paws patted at her dress from behind. A little white rabbit held a leaf from a fuzzy lamb’s ear plant in its mouth. “Thank you.” Raela took it and dabbed at her auntie’s cheeks. At her touch, her auntie whipped the leaf from her hand and honked her running nose into the makeshift tissue. She passed it back to Raela, who accepted it with a grimace.

“You are the dearest. Just look at you. You look just like her.” The edges of Auntie Toru’s eyes brimmed with water ready to fall again. Raela didn’t think she looked anything like her missing auntie. From what she could remember, her auntie’s chaotic white hair had stuck up in a thousand directions like dandelion fuzz. Nothing like Raela’s long yellow strands.

It was time to refocus. “Okay, Auntie Toru. Let’s fix things up.”

Auntie Toru nodded. “Yes. She would have liked that.” Her lip wobbled.

“The twine, Auntie?”

From Auntie Toru’s mosquito-bite-size bosom, an impossible amount of twine emerged, further deflating her thin frame. She passed it to Raela with a toothless grin. Raela took it between her thumb and index finger delicately, wondering at the fact that her aunties never changed.

“Okay.” Raela breathed out. “Let’s get weaving.”

Hours later, Raela tied the last bit of twine into the thatched roof. “Finally,” Raela muttered as she rubbed her chaffed hands. Other parts of the roof looked like they could use patching before winter, but they would have to wait for another day. The sun would soon set, and the roof was too large. The cottage was a comfortable size with four tiny bedrooms and one large central space downstairs. The first floor was the only place that Raela didn’t have to duck while walking.

“... then the willow whispered to the wisps, ‘The time has come, my sweets, to rest your weary spirit feet, so come and lay among my fronds, and sip from the rippling, sweet, deep ponds.’ So the wisps drew closer ...” Auntie Toru was on her hundredth story and had, not surprisingly, stopped working an hour before. Though, Raela had to admit, the stories did help pass the time.

This was Auntie Toru’s way. Her mind was filled with every tale and story and wish and myth that she had ever heard. Her memory was not as good when it related to daily tasks—like remembering where she had put her cup or if she had rinsed the soap from her hair.

“Torulonmana’at! Raelametanashi! The time has come!”

Auntie Toru’s face crumpled as if she had forgotten again, but now, the weight of her grief newly struck her like a physical blow.

“Oh, Auntie.” Raela climbed down and clasped the small woman by the shoulders. “I miss her too.”

Tears dripped steadily down her auntie’s face as Raela led her through the front door. Auntie Mo had set the cake in the center of their table and placed the unlit memory candle beside it. She passed each of them the sprig of a bitter herb and a slice of sweet pear. Four plates were set.

“Raelametanashi, if you would, please, light the candle,” Auntie Mo said with a catch in her voice. Raela twisted her fingers against her thumb. A spark flitted to the wick. Auntie Toru whimpered.

Holding up her bitter sprig, Auntie Mo spoke, her voice low and rough, like rocks rubbing over bark. “Dear sister, Shourentameta’il. We bite this herb as a symbol of our bitter suffering and loss.” Auntie Toru sobbed as she placed the bitter herb on her tongue. Raela’s eyes filled with tears as she tasted the herb’s bitterness. Auntie Mo continued, “We ache for you. We cry out for you. We wait for you. As the morning waits for the sun. As the willow waits for the rain.” As she lifted her slice of pear, Auntie Mo cleared her throat. “And with this, the sweetest fruit of the season, we remember every joy you brought to our lives.” She chewed slowly, swallowing before adding, “I remember your ridiculous jokes.”

Auntie Toru nibbled on her pear. “I remember your hugs.”

“I remember your smile,” Raela whispered.

“You smile like she does,” Auntie Toru said as her knobby thumb brushed Raela’s cheek. “You smile with your whole heart. The forest lights up with your happiness. Like it did for her. You feel like she did.”

Auntie Mo glanced between them before she nodded slowly. “Our Raelametanashi is much like our Shourentameta’il. Let us speak her name.” They all spoke softly, with reverence, pausing between each word. “*Shouren. Tam. Meta. ‘Il.* May you be at peace, wherever you are. And may you soon find your way home to us.”

They always had cake on this day—the dark day when the youngest of the three sisters went out of the forest and never returned, the day Raela wished she could somehow change. It had always felt odd to have cake, but her aunts always hoped and made ready for their sister’s return.

They always saved a piece for her.

After the meal, Raela's aunties regaled each other with story after story. She had heard them a thousand times but never tired to see their eyes glitter warmly as they remembered Auntie Shou. After one story, Auntie Mo looked suddenly at Raela.

"Today, you rushed in more agitated than a swarm of bees the ancient bear had asked for honey."

Raela had almost forgotten her earlier encounter, caught up as she was in the evening, but at the reminder, her cheeks flushed, and her heart raced. She had no idea how her aunties would respond. "Oh. That. There was someone in the forest. A man."

Auntie Toru blinked once, then burst into laughter, her knobby hand slapping her bulbous knee. "Someone in the forest? Why, *you* are a good storyteller!"

Frowning, Raela said, "I'm serious."

Auntie Toru kept laughing. "And you say, a man? This has never been. The light would never. Ha!" She wiped mocking tears from her crow's feet. "Oh, you sweet girl, I needed to laugh today."

Auntie Mo's lips were pinched, like she had eaten a berry too early. "Torulonmana'at. Stop."

"But Momo, you know—"

"This shall never be spoken of again." Auntie Mo's voice snarled like a bear. "Even if there was a person in this forest, you"—her gaze pierced Raela's—"are never ever to look at him or talk to him. You are to stay away, to never approach. It was a mistake. The light will not make it again."

Raela's lips popped open. "But the light sh—"

"Never again."

Her aunties had many rules for her. Don't eat the green berries of the Rushi tree. Never let the mushrooms form into fairy circles. Never go farther than one knuckle away from the house, certainly never go to the Spires ... but nothing like this. Something like obstinance bloomed in her chest, and she crossed her arms. "I'm never to talk to him?"

"Never," Auntie Mo answered. Her gaze drifted out the window, and Raela followed. The ancient elk stood just outside, staring at Auntie Mo. Auntie Mo nodded in acknowledgment of whatever the elk said to her and turned back to Raela. "If there was ever someone, you shall not speak of it. Do not even be downwind of anyone else." Raela's chest fluttered with frustration. The elk had been there! He should have confirmed her story! Why only talk to Auntie Mo?

Auntie Toru snorted. "If. If? As if anyone could enter!"

Auntie Mo held Raela's gaze. "My word is final, Raelametanashi."

Raela knew better than to lock horns with her Auntie Mo. But her heart hardened even as it questioned ... well ... everything. Raela knew other people existed—some of Auntie Toru's stories included them—but she had never seen them. She had only seen animals, both ordinary ones and a few ancients, and her aunties. She had never ventured far from their home. Never left their forest. Especially not after what happened that one time she had ventured down the riverbed—she had gotten lost and caused Auntie Shou's disappearance.

She had learned her lesson. She knew to stay in her little world and never venture far. But now, it was as if light shone through the haze. Now that she had seen one man, she had to consider that he had come from *somewhere out there*—and that Raela, herself, could go *somewhere*. The idea pricked her mind like a splinter.

She lifted indignant eyes to the concerned gaze of her Auntie Mo. And she deflated. She loved her aunties, so she would try to obey. Really, she would. They didn't make rules to harm her. Maybe she could return to the way things were before. Raela could live in her simple existence, cleaning, cooking, practicing with the magic of the forest ...

But as Raela settled herself back into her chair, studying the steam of her tea, new questions simmered, each one rising to the surface like the bubbles in her cup. Where was the man from? Were there others like him? Why couldn't she understand him? And then other questions squirmed uncomfortably. How did Raela come to the forest? Who were her parents? How could she

be so tall while her aunties were so short? And why was he taller than her aunties like she was? And, most disturbingly, why hadn't she asked any of these questions before? It was like her mind was waking and ideas that should have been obvious to every child were suddenly clear to her. She remembered Auntie Mo talking about her parents when Auntie Shou was around, but it had all stopped when she left, and Raela never thought to ask about them again.

She peered at her aunties with an uncomfortable, sinking sensation. They were so defensive—and these ideas felt so new when they should have been obvious and common—that she wondered if they had done something to make her forget. Prickling with distrust, she set down her mug, bade them a quiet goodnight, then went to her room to stare at the ceiling.

The ceiling provided no answers at all.

CHAPTER 4

Caught

Killian

Killian stood beside Phineas at the evening ball, sipping his drink and watching the other dancers. Phineas stared at him, his mouth flat with concern etched into every feature.

Killian glanced up at him. “What?”

“Don’t you *what* me. You came back less angry, but now you’re not even mentally here. You’re distracted, aimless. You aren’t even danc—”

“Your Highness.” A lady of the court curtsied low before them, tipping slightly too deeply and showing off her lowered neckline. “You are looking well.”

Killian bowed his head, keeping his eyes on the crowd. “Thank you. The night is a fine one.”

She blinked twice before she spoke again, moving closer than was strictly acceptable. “This song is a favorite of mine.”

Killian reached for a bite of something from a passing tray. “The musicians are particularly skillful today, I agree. This song is lyrical.” But not as lyrical as the one he’d heard in the forest’s clearing.

The lady shifted, then picked at her sleeve before glancing desperately around the room. “Well, if you would excuse me, Lord Byron is calling.” She curtsied shallowly before she stomped off, her cheeks slightly flushed.

Phineas laughed low and under his breath. “Exactly. Thank you, Lady Bethel.”

Killian fought to stop the roll of his eyes. “What is it?”

“You’ve always seen dancing as a princely duty.” He leaned closer. “But you hardly looked twice at that lady, and she was doing her very best to get your attention. What has you so distracted that you didn’t even notice her fawning?”

“Phin, everything is fine.” Setting his glass on a nearby table, Killian stepped out onto the balcony, Phineas hot on his heels.

“You’re good at many things but not lying.”

“I’m not a liar.”

Phineas tilted his head thoughtfully. “Not as a character trait, no. Unless you consider charm deceitful, which I do.”

“Make your point.” Killian leaned back against the balcony, the cool air a refreshing contrast to the stuffy room.

“All I know is you went into the forest one way and now your head is in the clouds.” Phineas stepped directly in front of him. “What happened today?” He tapped Killian’s forehead. “What is happening in there?”

Killian crossed his arms and drummed his fingers against his elbow. “Nothing.” *Everything*. Phineas tilted his lips in something like disbelief. Killian sighed. Phineas was never going to drop it. “It’s possible that Jax and I opened the gate.” Killian glanced up at Phineas.

It took a moment for the words to sink in, but when they did, his friend’s face paled. “Killian. You had better be talking about a different gate than the southern gate.” Killian shook his head. Phineas continued, “The gate to the Forbidden Forest, the supposed shield from evil for all of Norwood. The gate that we once tried to open as kids and had to spend *six months* cleaning up pig muck as punishment. I still smell like manure. Please tell me it’s not that gate, Killian.”

Every child had heard the story of the goblin army, the fairy riders on giant animals, and the gate that sealed to hold back the horde of evil. Killian grinned, pleased to disprove another childhood tale. The only giant animal was Jax—well, and now an elk and a bear. But everyone knew his family had ties to the wolf just like his father and father’s father before him. Jax was as much a part of the castle as the very stones. “Yes. That gate.”

Phineas let out a breath. “You’re more of an idiot than I realized.”

“You said to go ride.”

“Yeah, *around*. Your lands are enormous. I didn’t say, ‘Go try to kill yourself and then drag me down with you.’ Your father will kill me. Why in the seven stars didn’t Jax stop you?”

“He came with me.”

Phineas was pacing now, gesturing broadly with his massive hands. “I should have known. I should have gone too. You’ve grown increasingly ridiculous and thickheaded this year. Talking nonsense about your marriage, somehow forgetting sparring techniques you’ve known for years, and now, flouncing historical, national, and very solidly laid rules and boundaries. You must prioritize your role as king!”

Killian’s smile dropped, and a flame lit in his chest. “Phin, watch your tongue.”

“I will not! You are a good man with good ideas for the kingdom, but lately you’ve been acting like, like ... a ninny! A cotton-brained, pig-headed, single-minded, whiny little idiot.”

Killian surged away from the balcony railing. “You forget your place. You forget who you are talking to.”

Phineas’s expression darkened, and his shoulders shuddered under the restraint. “I am talking to my friend. Who I love. Who I don’t want to see acting like a blazing moron or ending up dead or accidentally releasing an ancient evil. You could be a great king. You’re a good man, but you’re losing your way. You’re ... quitting ...” He shook his head slowly. “I don’t want to watch you become someone I can’t trust.”

Killian’s anger lessened a fraction, and he sucked in a slow breath. Exhaling his frustration, he said quietly, “I don’t know why, Phin, but I needed to go in there. I saw a magical light, and it didn’t kill me. And then I saw someone.” Phineas’s brows furrowed as Killian spoke. “The most beautiful woman.”

Phineas rolled his eyes. “Another beautiful woman?” He gestured to the ballroom. “You’re surrounded by beautiful women.”

“That’s how I know this one was different! She didn’t recognize me or speak Common. She looked at me and ran!” Killian laughed at the absurdity. He’d never known such freeing anonymity. “Everyone here is a replica of all the others, pining for my attention, drooling over the metal circle on my head. She was different. You should have seen her. She was surrounded by forest animals ... and she was singing, just like in a children’s tale!”

Phineas took a deep breath, as a spark of his normal good humor glinted in his eye. “And, just to be clear, you didn’t eat any funny mushrooms, right? Didn’t fall into any fairy circles and transport yourself somewhere cursed? You’re not a changeling? Haven’t licked any warty, dream-inducing frogs?”

“No, Phin. I really saw her. I wasn’t hallucinating.” He held Phineas’s gaze, hoping his friend would see his sincerity.

Shaking his head, Phineas asked, “So, what’s your plan?”

“Go to the forest. Get to know her. Teach her Common. Figure out who she is.”

“Your betrothal, Killian.” Phineas shot him a sideways glance, his voice carrying an unwanted warning.

Killian huffed under his breath as he turned to face Phineas. “I’m not marrying the girl, just getting to know her. Maybe the forest has water and resources that would benefit our people. Maybe there are others like her and someone can help us end the drought. The grass was so green in that meadow.”

Phineas placed his hand on the prince’s shoulder. “Killian, it’s against the law.”

Killian shrugged off his hand and stepped back a pace. “Phineas, I’m doing this. I have to do this.”

Phineas shook his head slowly, his brow etched with concern. “But why?”

Killian had been asking himself the same question all night. The woman had fixed herself before him, and he couldn’t look away. A slow breath seeped through his teeth. “It was like all this”—he gestured toward the ball—“was black and white, and when I saw her, I saw color for the first time. It was like I had a heart of stone, but simply looking at her, I felt...” He shrugged

and turned toward the distant forest line, which was black despite the bright moon above them. “She made me feel like I could be more, not laden with expectations, preconceived notions, or ... or failure.”

Phineas paused and looked at Killian’s face. Killian wasn’t sure what he was searching for, but he felt exposed. He shifted his shoulders.

“I’m coming with you,” Phineas declared finally.

Killian gaped. “You can’t! Jax said if the beam of magical light doesn’t approve you, you’ll burn up!”

Phineas blinked twice but continued, “Well, that would certainly be awful, but I can’t let you frolic around in the magic forest without a chaperone.”

“Jax will be there.”

“Jax doesn’t understand human morals, betrothals, or policies. Nor can he speak with your father.”

It’s more that he will not speak with me. The two men looked down over the edge of the balcony where two green eyes gleamed from the shadows of the trees. Jax paced forward. *I have tried, but he cannot yet hear me.* Killian nodded. His father had stopped listening to Jax after his wife died. The grief, Jax thought, made him deaf.

Phineas gestured toward the wolf. “Even more reason, then. I’m coming. You could use a witness to back you up.”

Killian turned and set his hand on his friend’s forearm. “I cannot let you. I cannot be the cause of your death. You are a brother to me.”

I do not think the light will burn Phineas.

Looking back to the garden Killian asked, “Why not? You said it would kill me.”

Phineas has a pure heart.

“And I don’t?”

It is enough, apparently, as demonstrated today, but lately ...

Killian threw up his arms. “Ugh. Okay, I get it. I’ll be better. No more wallowing.”

Yes. The pathetic wallowing is like scat. Stinky and undesirable.

“Your point has been made, Jax.”

Discardable, disgusting pile of excrement.

Phineas snorted. “An excellent assessment.”

“My dearest friends ...” Killian shook his head slowly, but a grin was growing. “So ... tomorrow?”

Phineas and Jax spoke in unison. “Tomorrow.”

Killian slowly faced the music of the ball, rallying his best vapid conversation skills and charming prince persona. Shake hands, dance with whoever he was expected to dance with, and then plan his escape to the forest. Tomorrow, he would look for clues to help his people. Tomorrow, he would see *her* again.

His face broke into a genuine grin.

Before dawn the next morning, Killian, Phineas, and Jax made their way to the gate. Jax eyed the bouquet of flowers that Killian held with an expression somewhere between disdain and disbelief. *So ... you’re planning on giving her flowers?*

Killian dropped his gaze to the large collection of long-stemmed, odiferous, spriggy blooms he had cut himself from the hot house. It had been hard to see perfectly in the dim candlelight this morning, but he was certain they’d be beautiful when the sun

rose. “Of course! What girl doesn’t like flowers?”

Jax landed hard on his haunches, looking from the forest to Killian and back. *Perhaps a girl who lives in the forest, surrounded by plants?*

“Bah—have faith.” Killian waved the flowers at his friend’s sensitive nose. “These will be great. They’re beautiful and rare. They’re impressive.”

Phineas snorted even as he shook his head at the two of them. His suspicious glare remained focused on the dark gate. “Please don’t say this is how you plan to charm your betrothed?”

“Come on, now.” He looked between his two friends, who had seen him give flowers to various dignitaries’ daughters or court ladies on walks or as a corsage for a ball. Hadn’t they seen it work? “I’ve given women flowers before. They’re always delighted.”

Jax rolled his eyes in a way that was uncomfortably human. *It was probably the crown more than the sprigs that got their attention.*

Killian frowned. Phineas laughed out loud as he patted Killian’s shoulder. Killian glared at them both. The main reason he was here—why he wanted to visit this woman—was that she didn’t seem to know anything about his crown. Balling his fingers tightly around the stems, he muttered, “I’m going to leave you two behind.”

Throwing both of his hands up, Phineas didn’t stop smiling. “Sorry. Sorry. We’ll behave.”

Jax huffed. *Phineas will behave.*

“Jax!” Killian stared down at the wolf, waiting for his agreement.

Licking his paw, Jax paused for just a moment. *I will ... not deliberately sabotage you.*

Killian set a hand on the handle of the gate which seemed to hum in a buzzing vibration. “Ever a source of comfort, Jax.” Killian stopped and turned back to Phineas as a frisson of dread slipped up his spine. “I can’t convince you to stay? To not do this? Jax will keep me safe.”

Phineas shrugged casually. “You survived it. I can’t let you beat me, can I?”

The prince set his right hand on Phineas’s left shoulder, a tightness forming at his throat. “I’m serious. I don’t want you to die.”

Phineas’s grin sobered, and he mimicked Killian in the soldier’s way, setting his right hand on Killian’s left shoulder, while his left hand rested on the hilt of his sword. “You are more than a prince who deserves my loyalty, Killian. You are my brother. And I’m not letting you go alone.”

Killian clenched his jaw a couple times before turning back to the gate. “Well. Let’s go see what the light makes of you.” With an easy click, the gate swung open, sending the rushing icy wind past them as they stepped onto the pine needles beyond the gate.

The forest was darker than the meadow behind them; starlight was blocked by the boughs, but this time, early morning songs from unseen songbirds greeted the day. The air was warm and humid, the sweet vanilla scent of the ponderosas wrapping around them. As the sun crept into the sky, the shadows of the forest lifted, and by degrees, they could see their path more clearly.

Phineas led them all forward, but each step felt like a drumbeat moving them closer to the gallows. Acrid dread laced Killian’s heart until the beam of light appeared and struck Phineas directly.

And nothing happened.

Phineas walked on with Jax keeping pace beside him, unfazed and unaware that anything unusual had occurred.

Killian's jaw dropped as he gestured wildly. "Are you kidding me? It paralyzed me! Trapped me with visions of my past. But you ... you didn't even flinch!"

Phineas glanced back at the beam behind him that trickled peacefully to the earth. "It's just light, Killian."

"Magic. Light."

I had already told you it would be so. Ancient and wise, remember?

"And humble," Killian grumbled.

And handsome. Jax's tongue lolled out of his wide grin.

"Well," said Phineas, rubbing his chin. "The good news is that I didn't burn up—"

Like parchment.

"Exactly. So where is she?" Phineas asked as he looked around the pine forest.

The birds chirped loudly, alerting everyone that the sun had risen. Killian moved toward the meadow, listening for a song that wasn't there. "Where indeed?"

CHAPTER 5

Indecisive

Raela

Raela kicked at another mushroom, breaking up the forming circle, before she gathered the stem and root to plant somewhere else. It was bold of the ring to grow so close to the cottage; it should have known better. They weren't evil things, mushrooms, but they did have a propensity to allow evil through when they circled up. Portals to other places that allowed other darker magics. At least, that's what her aunties said.

Portals. Why hadn't her knowledge of portals triggered Raela to question her existence in the forest and the world? Why hadn't they made her wonder about *other* places or where she was from? She was grateful for her aunties' care. They had educated her. They had loved her. But how was it loving to keep things from her?

She pressed the mushroom into the earth beside an old oak tree—this one topped with red and speckled with white—more ferociously than strictly necessary. Then she clomped off to hang the laundry. Throw. Clamp. Throw. Clamp. Throw. Clamp. The wind whooshed with the flick of her hand, causing the dress to whip around the thin vine and slap Raela in the face.

With a grunt, Raela grabbed the dress and heaved it back into the basket. Raela formed a fist to stop the wind from sweeping around her feet.

"Your magic seems strong today," Auntie Mo said from behind her. "The earth shakes with your every step."

Raela took a deep breath. "Just finishing up some chores."

"Like a bear?"

Irritation bubbled to the surface. "Sure, Auntie Mo." Raela fought to reel back her frustration. It wasn't her auntie's fault that she had a splinter in her mind, itching, prickling, and pestering her. Probably. Or more likely it was that twice-cursed, no-good, woods-traipsing man who had dared step inside their forest. If he hadn't shown up, she still could have been content. Happy.

But also ignorant.

Thoughts of him had kept her up entirely too late last night.

"Well, when you're done getting the bee out of your hair, would you go check on the irises? I have a bad feeling that this week's sunshine has been too much for them. Coax them back to strength like I taught you. Call the water if you must. Or grow a bit of shade if they are too beaten down."

Auntie Mo always had a bad feeling about everything. Unfortunately, she was often right. Raela took a slow breath through her nose, attempting to calm her temper. "I'll head right there. After this ..."

Cupping Raela's cheek, Auntie Mo smiled. Raela almost pulled away, but her Auntie's eyes lined with a rim of tears. "You are the dearest creature. I hope you know that."

Blinking, Raela said, "Um. I love you too." She didn't mean to lift the end of the sentence, as if it was a question, but Auntie Mo wasn't known for her gentle affection ... or for crying. Ever.

Auntie Toru emerged from behind the house walking toward the apple trees, one hand on her cane, the other resting on the ancient elk. When she saw them, she immediately burst into tears and stumbled hastily away.

What was with them today?

"On with you, now," Auntie Mo said, patting her apron as if to gather herself. "We'll see you tonight. We need to talk about your birthday dinner."

"That's next month, Auntie."

"Never too early to plan. What if the flowers get blight? We could pick and hang them now to be ready then. Plan like a squirrel, I always say." And with a snuffle, she bustled away, her little legs moving double-time back into the kitchen.

Something was definitely going on. They were notoriously emotional on their memorial day and maybe a day or two leading up to it ... but they were usually more cheerful afterward, more hopeful, more anticipatory ...

She tossed her hands into the air in surrender. Who could understand their whims? Raela stashed the basket beside the house and made her way east, toward the iris patch, singing a song to settle herself as she walked. The jays followed beside her.

“Run little mink, the storm is on its way.
Rest from your hunting and go another day.
The lightning is flashing, the wind is yet fierce,
but sleep in your cave, safe and unpierced.”

The lullaby was one of her favorites, one of Auntie Shou’s, of course, and apparently, a favorite of the birds as well. When she paused to climb over a fallen log, there were loud squawks of displeasure at her silence.

“Sorry, friends,” Raela murmured. She continued the song for another verse as she approached the tall, open irises her auntie had sent her after.

Irises that looked absolutely perfect.

The sun was warm but not burning. Raela stuck her finger in the earth, which was well hydrated. The wind was cool, the petals vibrant, and the stalks strong and growing. She used magic to pull a bit of water from the deeper soil and push it around the roots, but these were fundamentally healthy plants.

Was Auntie Mo more paranoid than usual? Or... was this a deliberate attempt to send Raela away from the northern meadow?

She turned in the direction of that meadow. Where was he now? Would he come back? What was a man like?

A quiet loping gallop preceded a fluffy, surprisingly heavy bear cub that barreled into her. Raela reached down just as the cub’s brother collided against Raela’s thighs and knocked all three of them over with a puff of seed, pollen, and dust into the air.

“Ouch. You two are heavy. What have you been eating?” Raela laughed as she dragged her fingers into the thick fur between their fluffy ears.

The twins spoke in her mind so fast she could hardly register who said what. *Berries. The blackberries! Acorns. Fish. I love fish. I love fish more! No, you don’t.* And many other words that she didn’t catch. Mother Bear gave a low rumble, and with only a small complaint, the cubs crawled off Raela and turned to wrestle each other down the hill instead.

Mother Bear sauntered beside Raela and snuffed her hair in a gust of hot breath. *Young one, you seem agitated. Is everything okay?* The bear looked around the hill they were resting on. *I see no fairy circles. Why have you come here?*

“Auntie Mo was worried about the flowers. But they seem fine.”

She nudged Raela with her massive head. *And what are you worried about?*

Tapping her fingers on her leg, Raela spun around to sit by her bear. The sweet scent of the meadow warmed by the sun was soothing but didn’t wash away her agitation. “Where did I come from? Have I always lived here? Where are my aunts from? Do I have a mother or father? Or did I? What is beyond the forest, or up the mountain or down the river, beyond a day’s travel? What about—”

So many questions for someone so small. The huffing laugh from the massive beast sent Raela’s hair fluttering around her. Mother Bear sat heavily in the grass, sending seeds and dust billowing up and around them. *These are questions I didn’t expect from you for a bit longer. What changed?*

She shrugged. “Nothing. Everything. I don’t know. I’m thinking about things that had never occurred to me before seeing that man in the meadow.”

The bear nodded her massive head. *He was quite handsome.*

Raising an eyebrow, Raela looked sideways at the bear. “Do you know so many men that you could judge that?”

In my many long days, I have seen many men from many different walks of life. Most were wealthy and important. A few were handsome.

Seeing his chiseled face in her mind, with his dark brown hair and green-gray eyes, Raela thought he might be handsome. Her cheeks felt strangely hot at the idea.

Raela shook her head to clear the thoughts. “Auntie said I should never see or speak to him again.”

Your aunties love you and want to protect you.

“But I think they’ve been keeping things from me.” The bear’s sharp silence told Raela she was right. She shook her head, trying to ward off another wave of frustration and anger.

“What if too much protection is stifling? So much shade that I can’t grow?”

Many things feel stifling to the young and vibrant. It is also easy to drown flowers in too much water. But they do all things out of their love for you.

Raela inhaled, reminding herself of the values she had been taught. Obedience. Gentleness. Respect. She could be a good girl. An attentive, properly respectful young lady. But ... She exhaled, releasing more questions. What about curiosity, the pursuit of knowledge and ... and ... keeping the forest safe? Those were good too. Wasn’t she a guardian of the forest? Wasn’t she its protector? Raela wasn’t trying to disobey. Just ... to collect information. Observe and defend their forest against Against handsome intruders.

Raela picked at her thumbnail. “And what if I choose differently?”

All you can do is make the best decision at the time with the knowledge that you carry. The bear crooned, batting playfully at her cub. *I trust your instincts, and the forest will protect you too. Just be wise, do not form attachments, and stay in the forest. I wish I could go with you, but I sense you need to do this on your own. I will always be here if you need me. Just call. And don’t worry about the wolf, the light seemed to like him too.*

With that breath of permission, Raela rose to her tiptoes, kissed Mother Bear on her fuzzy cheek, and skipped down the hill, patting each cub in turn. Her instincts burned with curiosity. Her aunties had trained her to defend herself, too, if needed. But she needed to ask some questions.

And maybe, she would get some real answers.

Killian

“She’s not coming, is she?” Killian sulked with sunken shoulders as he stood in the center of the meadow. They’d waited too long; Killian had already missed his morning tutoring and might be late to lunch with his father, but he had to show Phineas he wasn’t crazy. Or maybe show *himself* that he wasn’t crazy. But there had been no sign of the woman. The birds sang peacefully. The wind shifted gently. It was all exceedingly nonthreatening and decidedly unmagical. Killian pretended to ignore his feeling of foolishness.

“If Jax hadn’t been with you, I’d accuse you of making her up,” Phineas said as he broke tiny sticks and tossed the pieces into the bush ahead of them. “Too much drink, too little sleep. But alas.”

Jax flopped to his back as his paws batted a fly. *She was real. But she is really not here now too.*

Killian groaned. “Okay. We can head back. This was a fool’s errand.”

Yes. This is true. The wolf rolled to his feet and shook off the dust.

Phineas set a hand on Killian’s shoulder as he passed him. “I’m sorry, friend.”

Killian looked around the meadow one last time, begging her to come, but with a final huff, he turned after his companions. She wasn’t coming.

Head low, he studied the ground as he went. What would he say to his father to excuse his absence this morning? He was breaking the law, chasing a girl in the Forbidden Forest? Maybe she was a sprite, or a ghost, or ...

From the side of the meadow, purple iridescent smoke caught his gaze. Gentle light filtered through the edge of the pine trees above. Below them grew a sweeping arc of glowing mushrooms, making almost a full circle. Killian had never seen a mushroom glimmer before. Most were brown and boring. He reached for it, wanting to bring it fully into the light so he could look more closely, but as he stretched out his fingers, the beam of light shone hotly on his hand, and two large blue jays screamed and dived toward his head. He reared back, stumbling into the grasses. The jays disappeared as fast as they had come, taking the light with them. He stood and searched the trees.

“Ra lonsha’ta bammé las’ho. Ha bet kuncham.”

Killian whirled toward the feminine voice, his heart hammering in his chest as she slipped out from behind the trees to his right. Her blue eyes pierced his soul, from which bubbled a ridiculous amount of relief, along with a nervousness he had never before experienced, even while in court.

She says something about mushrooms and death, Jax translated.

“Better not touch those then,” Phineas chided.

“Uh, hello. Here. These are for you.” Killian pushed the bouquet of flowers toward her. They were a bit beaten up from his fall, and wilted from the lack of water, but pretty, nonetheless.

Her full lips tilted downward. “Toru ra kunch’at las’hi’as? Rana noma’at omnóm hashá.” She glanced back at him, her brow furrowed.

Jax snorted. *Why and death and something about not eating the flowers.*

The jays called again, and she turned to the forest where Phineas emerged from the bushes. The woman took a step back as she examined Phineas. “Calle las? Haro bet pa grun pa e clanta.”

She says you’re a moose, I think. That’s the image, at least. She’s not wrong. Jax took a couple paces toward her and bowed low over his paws. Her smile widened again, and she bowed with her hands together at her forehead. “Shaana honte’aco, ra nuret.” Jax sniffed at her fingers, then licked one.

At her touch, the massive wolf jolted back. *She's magical! It's not just the forest, it's her!*

"Well, we should have guessed after hearing her sing to the animals," Killian said as he surveyed her with this new information.

Why didn't I sense her, though? I should have felt her arrival. Jax landed back on his haunches, his head twisted to one side as he studied her. The woman was frowning at the fingers Jax had licked with confusion.

Killian stepped forward, again placing his hand on his chest before pointing to the others. "Killian. Jax. Phineas." He looked at her. "And your name is?"

She peered at him, every ounce of the warm welcome she offered Jax cooled when she faced him. "Raelametanashi."

Killian hesitated, then asked Jax in a low voice, "Is that her name, or is she saying something else?"

I ... I am not sure. The feelings I get from those words don't make sense, exploding light? Sleeping? It is unclear.

She took three steps toward Killian, stopping just before him. She placed a hand on his chest. Her palm was hot through his shirt. "Killian." She moved her hand to her own chest. "Raelametanashi."

"Raelamesha ..." Killian's tongue struggled to pronounce the initial sounds.

"Raelametanashi," she said, slower.

He tried again, equally butchering it. Phineas snorted.

She sighed heavily. "Raela?"

"Raela."

Her face blossomed into a wide smile before she tempered it. His heart pitter-pattered in excitement. Her smile was even more beautiful up close. "Rana hemuma'il ga las'hi. Toru bet ra hi ga ranarana maneta?"

I think she is asking why, and all I see are a bunch of trees. Probably 'forest.'

"We were looking for you." Killian pointed to her. "Raela."

At least this time, there is no bear.

Raela tilted her head at Jax who must have spoken to her mind too. "Grumba?" She clawed her hands on either side and growled low.

"She understood that one." Killian shook his head, trying to keep his smile warm. "No bear. No g-grumba."

"Ta Grumba." The woman nodded and babbled on again in her language as she grabbed a leaf from a nearby oak. Using the leaf as a barrier between her hand and the mushrooms, she began transplanting them along the meadow edge in a scattered pattern. Each time she moved a mushroom, more of the purple hazy dust dissipated until it cleared completely. Satisfied, the woman rose, set the leaf down next to the mushrooms, and brushed off her hands. She hovered an open palm over a patch of dirt, and as she lifted her hand, a column of water erupted from the ground beneath it. She washed her fingertips before settling the fountain back down. Another motion swept the dirt back over the area, removing any trace of the miniature geyser. The men and wolf gaped. Killian had never seen such magic before.

She tilted her head up toward them with a confused expression. Killian sighed. "Jax, did you catch what she was saying?" The wolf shook his head. *I was distracted by the magic. But something about mushrooms.*

Huffing, Killian muttered, "Our communication isn't working."

Phineas laughed. "You mean your brilliant and forbidden plan to wander the forest looking for a foreign stranger was poorly thought out? I'm shocked."

Killian ignored his friend as he looked around to try to begin their lessons in communication. He picked up a rock. "Rock." Raela stood and approached with furrowed brows. Killian pointed to his bouquet. "Flowers."

She pointed to the stone and said, "Isa lonmar."

Jax sat. *Little mountain ... no that's not right ... something about memories?*

She pointed to the flowers. "Isa otu ya etera."

Brief, short, now ... something ... maybe pretty? Jax tried to translate again.

Killian repeated her words. Raela smiled and tried pointing out the dirt, clouds, the sun, and after some confusion, the wind.

He pointed to the bird yelling at them in the trees. "Blue jay."

She giggled. Her face radiated amusement at their game. "Grun peket."

Jax huffed a wolfy laugh. *This language is very specific. That was 'loud' or 'big noise.'*

She grabbed Killian's hand and dragged him around the meadow, pointing, naming, and pulling again. Killian said each word as she tugged him behind her, repeating her words. Her fingers were cool and slender and soft, but not velvety like those of the court ladies. He could tell she worked with her hands, but they were gentle, nonetheless. He laughed as he was yanked toward yet another new thing to identify.

After over an hour, she suddenly froze. Whirling back to look at the sun, she measured its height above the trees, then she threw Killian's hand down and backed away. "Otu bet'at grigrun. Dela'aco arot'il ken nami. Na olit shum."

Jax tilted his head. *She is leaving. Someone she loves is searching.*

Phineas rose from his seat on the ground. "We should get you back, too, Killian."

"Okay." Killian pointed to the sun, made gestures of a circle up and around, then pointed to the meadow. "Here. Tomorrow."

She made a circle with her fingers and followed it by the other hand in a C shape. The circle shape rose again. She pointed to his feet. "Kainara hi, Nurenitam. Na olit arotonmaram ken ra laanma."

A circle of the night, she said. Jax tilted his head before pawing at his maw. *I think that we understand each other.*

Killian nodded. She smiled and backed into the shadows of the trees. She waved with a flit of her fingertips, and then she was gone.

Phineas patted Killian on the shoulder as they stepped through the lush meadow grasses. "Well, you are crazy about many things, but I can see why you thought she was worth returning to. Hopefully, this escapade doesn't get you into trouble. Or killed."

As Killian felt the heat of the sun and the reality of his lateness to the meeting set in, he wasn't so sure he wouldn't end up dead from his father's hand yet.

CHAPTER 6

What We Know

Raela

She was going to be in so much trouble. She raced back home through the forest, cresting the hills and dales of the gently sloping earth which hardened to support her flight. Auntie Mo would know—she always knew. Raela had no idea what to tell her auntie she had been up to.

But what was really so evil about her visit? It had been a very pleasant information gathering event. She had deftly defended the forest against his ... poor pronunciation. Raela grinned. If she was being honest, she'd had a wonderful time. His language was so clunky and full of hard sounds. Her mind flitted through all the new words. She would—she must—remember them.

Pausing before she approached the house, Raela settled her breathing. Snatching the basket, she began collecting the dried clothes off the line as if she had just returned from the irises. Auntie Mo was singing in the house. An excellent sign. Raela smiled. Maybe Auntie Mo hadn't noticed after all.

Raela reached for the last dress. Behind it stood a wide-eyed, staring, finger-pointing Auntie Toru. In her surprise, Raela stumbled, tossing the basket as she fell backward. Thankfully, she didn't shriek. Auntie Toru took one wobbly step forward as Raela lay sprawled on the grass.

Her voice, cracked as it was, grated on Raela's frayed nerves. "I know where you've been, child."

Raela tried to laugh it off, but her voice sounded strained even to her ears. "Oh, Auntie Toru. I was at the iris patch, then I saw some lightshrooms trying to circle up. They had almost circled all the way around. The haze was starting, but don't worry, I got there in time. No evil today!"

Her auntie peered down at her. "These things are true. But they are not all." Auntie Toru stepped forward and prodded Raela's stomach with her cane. "You were in the pines."

"Yes, the circle—"

"You were not alone."

Raela swallowed hard and rose to her feet, turning to pick up her basket. "Auntie, you know the forest blocks the way," she hedged.

"The earth is vibrating today. The stones are groaning with change." Raela glanced back at her auntie's face. The woman's gaze fixed distantly to the Spires in the south. "There are things that were said. Things that were done. Things that were promised. Danger is coming." She hissed after the last word as her black eyes flashed like obsidian and pierced Raela. Raela shivered. Her skin prickled. But before her next breath, Auntie Toru's eyes glazed with tears. "And I don't know how to stop it." Her head thumped against Raela's stomach as her shoulders rocked her with sobs.

"What? Auntie, it's okay. Everything is okay." Her hands trembled nervously as she patted her auntie.

"It wasn't okay. You cannot know." She sniffed and wiped her nose on Raela's apron. "I want you to be safe. I wish I knew what will come. All I know is what's been done."

Raela squeezed the tiny woman. "What do you mean, Auntie? Can't you tell me? I'm here, aren't I? Safe at home. Perhaps you were out in the sun too long. Come. Have some tea. I'll get you a snack from Auntie Mo. I'm safe, Auntie Toru."

Her auntie wailed again. "You cannot know. It's done. It has happened."

Concerned and confused, Raela led her auntie inside. Grabbing the piping kettle, she poured some willow bark tea with chamomile and a sprig of peppermint, mixing a bit extra into the recipe she had improved from her aunts. She then stirred in a bit of yellow mushroom powder for strength of heart. Auntie Mo shook her head, well accustomed to her sister's strong

emotions. Auntie Toru took the mug and rocked herself in a large wooden chair by the fireplace. Soon, she was dozing, her mug empty and dangling from a fingertip.

Raela couldn't settle down. Her fingers trembled from her auntie's ominous comments, even those conveyed in half sentences. Auntie Toru was ever the pessimist, but usually not to this degree. The men—Killian and Phineas—were just creatures and no match for the power of the forest. And Auntie Toru knew Raela was never really alone. Not here. She had the constant attention of the forest's magic with Mother Bear a call away.

Raela was the messenger, the scout, and now, the translator. If the men proved dangerous, Raela and the animals would kick them out—even the ancient wolf. But what was the danger in gaining knowledge? What did Auntie Toru know that she was unwilling to share?

Killian

Killian was walking on air. She had come. They had spoken. Even Phineas's doubts had been silenced when he saw her. She wasn't a figment of Killian's imagination but flesh and blood—magic blood, apparently, but still. Killian tossed the bouquet into the pine forest just before they crossed the gate. The flowers hadn't caught her fancy. He'd have to think of something else.

"Tomorrow, we should bring parchment," he said as they raced back to the castle. "Then we could write down some of her words. Draw pictures and the like."

"You have reconnaissance training tomorrow, and the Ryker family is staying in the guest suites while Lord Ryker travels to the Isle." Phineas paced beside him. "And your tailor comes in the morning to fit you for your wedding outfit."

Don't forget the chef wants to review the meats of the feast.

Phineas nodded. "Oddly specific knowledge, Jax, but yes."

I plan to participate in the feast.

Killian froze, an icy wave rolling down his spine. He had forgotten about his wedding. Forgotten about Lady Zalina and her mother staying under his roof. Forgotten that her father had been given the ambassador role that Killian had wanted. Killian still didn't fully understand why the northern army encampment and their many guards were insufficient to protect Lord Ryker's wife and daughter while he was away.

Due to his cursed wedding, there would be more social events than ever. Not to mention a strain on his people due to the feasts of bounty, assuming they could salvage the harvests this year. He neither needed nor wanted any further distractions.

Killian slapped a hand on his forehead. "Zalina will want to be wherever I am." Killian scratched at his temple.

Phineas set a hand on Killian's shoulder, pinning him with a gaze. "Your father will expect you to host well. She *can't* know about the gate, Killian. Not a whisper." Killian knew he was referring to the conversation he'd had with Lady Zalina, which his father had found out about. Killian had only wanted to share his frustrations with a friend. His father saw it as "weak dependance on a woman" and called Killian "unfit to lead if unable to decide on your own," and "pathetic."

Dread pooled in his belly. Phineas's gaze was sharper than was comfortable. "You're right. I'll share nothing. Perhaps Zalina can be appeased by my attention at other times, like walks in the garden."

His friend frowned slightly. "Perhaps."

Waving off Phineas's doubt, Killian climbed the outside stairs to the parlor. "Regardless, I need to go to the library to find out more about the gate and forest. All I can remember are the children's stories, and I remember those poorly. I'll need histories, language dictionaries, maps—anything from the last few hundred years. And the betrothal contract. I want to read it myself."

"So much was burned by your great-grandfather before the war, but some things may have been saved." Phineas crossed his arms. "Researching the gate and your betrothal contract yourself won't be suspicious at all."

Killian paused, considering Phineas's words. "Do you mind looking into it for me? I'd be grateful for anything you can find."

Phineas's massive shoulders slumped. "I'm no scholar." He scratched the back of his head. "But you shouldn't be the one to do it, I suppose. I'll grab what I can and bring it to you."

"Have fun with the dust bunnies." Walloping him on the shoulder, Killian grinned. "And thanks."

Phineas waved before heading back down the stairs, Jax at his heels. The gardeners scrambled aside, pressing against the castle wall to let the large wolf pass. No one but the two men were particularly comfortable with the large beast on the castle grounds, but as an ancient, he'd earned a significant measure of deference and the uncomfortable respect of all who saw him.

Do you think there's any chicken left in the kitchens? Jax mused in both their minds as the two slipped away.

Killian heard Phineas chuckle. "Didn't the chef throw a potato at you the last time you tried to raid the kitchen? You finally pushed him over the edge."

He missed, though. And today is a new day. Perhaps we'll be friends.

"Perhaps this time, he'll throw a knife ..."

Killian was smiling as he headed back up the stairs. Opening the door of the parlor quietly, he slipped into the room and turned to face four pairs of eyes. The disappointed gaze of his father. The shocked and contemptuous looks of Lord and Lady Ryker. And the high arching brow of Lady Zalina.

Swallowing hard, he approached the table and bowed low. "My apologies for my tardiness. I took a ride this morning to check on a few things and was swept away with the time. Forgive me."

Lady Zalina twittered a laugh. "There's nothing to forgive, Your Highness. We were just starting. Have you eaten?"

He took his seat beside her, across from the tense ambassador and adjacent to the boiling anger of his father, thankful for Zalina's pleasant deflections. "I haven't. I see the huckleberries are finally in season."

"Those tarts are the loveliest thing I have tasted in all the world."

The table lightened by degrees as Zalina and Killian spoke, others breaking into their own conversations. Lord Ryker would leave for the Isle this afternoon to work on their trade agreements and supply chains. He was a master advisor, as brilliant as he was well-spoken. His wife had a sweet temperament and was quick to smile ... when she wasn't offended by Killian, at least. Both were older but well liked, wealthy, and envied by other nobles. They'd been barren but had adopted Zalina, a distant cousin, a few years back. Killian ignored the ache in his chest that it was Lord Ryker and not him who was chosen to go to the Isle. What was done was done.

After breakfast, the king stood, drawing the rest of them to their feet. "My son, if you'd come with me."

Killian brushed the last crumb from his fingertips. "Of course, Father." He bowed to the Rykers. "Excuse me."

The tension in Killian's chest ratcheted as they approached his father's office. As the only son and heir to the throne, his relationship with his father had been ... businesslike ... rather than intimate. Phineas's relationship with his father, Lord Japheth, had evoked Killian's jealousy more than once, tempting him to dabble in comparison, but comparison only brought heartache. After the death of his queen, the king had no room for affection between them.

Sweeping to his desk, the king sat and eyed his son over the rim of the wine chalice still in his hand. "I was going to send you to the Isle with Lord Ryker for a week." Killian stilled—he hadn't considered that his father might send him also—then he braced for the impact threatened by his father's ominous tone. "*Was*. But then you were late. Clearly, you are still not responsible. You have no regard for your position or your future."

Killian's jaw pulsed as he clenched back a wave of frustration. A thousand defenses rose in his mind, but he stifled them. "I apologize for being late."

"Too soon you will be king. Time is not your own. Leisure is not for you. Your life is only for your kingdom."

"I know, Father, but I have done so much already. I have rarely been late before! I do everything you ask. I would do anything to g—"

"Except give us your time." The king set down his glass and leaned forward. His breath was hot and laced with more drink than Killian had seen him imbibe at lunch. "Your words and actions don't align. If you would give anything for your kingdom, then you should have given your hour to welcome our ambassador."

Killian choked out the words. "I understand, Father."

“Perhaps, next time, you can demonstrate your ability to be responsible. Sometimes, I’m glad your mother isn’t with us anymore. At least, she doesn’t have to suffer from this disappointment.”

Guilt twisted within Killian’s chest. “I would give anything to have her here.”

“You should have thought of that fourteen years ago.”

The tension brimming within him erupted. “I was seven. I didn’t know the knife was cursed.” He threw his hands up. “Don’t you know I’d give anything to go back and never pick it up? But I can’t, Father. I can’t change the past. I’ve fought in every tournament you’ve compelled me to fight in. I’ve met with every leader you’ve asked me to meet. I’ve gone north to the harbors —”

“You’ve either lost those tournaments or bribed someone in order to win.”

Killian started to say, “Phineas pulled out of one tournament, but Father, the others—”

The king interrupted again. “And the leaders you poorly handled because of your laziness in mastering their language. Even the harbors were only fixed because Zalina had a stroke of brilliance despite your sharing of state secrets.”

Killian bristled. “I shared no state secrets. As you know, Phineas—”

“Phineas has always beaten you, and he always will. He arrives on time, wins tournaments, and never backs down. He speaks Tallenish better than you and, likely, wouldn’t have lost us that deal you single-handedly bungled. Nor has he lamed my favorite horse, unlike you. I have watched him well this whole time. Perhaps he should be named heir instead.”

The air was knocked out of Killian’s lungs. His father had threatened him with Phineas every year of his life, but this threat seemed different. The king’s expression appeared thoughtful, his words devoid of passion or anger. Killian swallowed, embarrassed by the wavering of his words. “I will do whatever you ask of me, Father.”

The king’s voice was low. “Then bring her back.” He set his glass on the table. The room sat in horrible silence. Killian wanted his mother more than words could say, but how could he do what his father had asked? The king straightened, dipped his quill, and pulled a parchment toward him. “Seeing as you cannot do that, nor can you ready yourself to go to the Isle, you must turn your attention to your wedding. Meet the tailors. Opine on the tapestries. Make yourself available. Try to not embarrass me as we host Lady Ryker and Lady Zalina this time. Ensure they feel welcome.” The king waved a hand toward the door, disappointment still wafting from him like smoke. “Go now. Play with your swords.”

Killian turned and walked out, each step controlled, until he had closed the door to the office behind him. His chest was split in a maelstrom of emotion. Guilt, grief, pride, and pain all tore at him from within. Anger boiled above it all. His hands shook in frustration as heat flooded his gut. Swirling, he stalked out to the training yard. Soldiers and servants stepped aside before him, but he barely noticed, their words mere murmurs. Once he reached the training field, the soldiers moved in formation at the cries of his commanders, but the sounds struck him distantly.

The king arrived late all the time. He bent the schedule around his whims. The people adjusted. His father was a hypocrite. And his father would never forgive him. Not for the death of his mother. Not for his failures along the way. Not for any of it.

Phineas was already out in the field, leading the youngest men through their sword forms. At least out here, his father couldn’t control his every move. Killian strode up and grabbed a practice sword.

Phineas gestured to the young soldiers to continue, then he turned and eyed Killian from head to toe. “I take it things didn’t go well with your father.” The men entered the practice arena.

Killian only grunted. He removed his jacket and threw it toward the fence line, knowing Phineas would be right behind him. They fell into well-practiced steps as they fought.

“He doesn’t trust me. He said I’m not responsible because I was late. If I care about the kingdom, he said, I should have been on time. I have no regard for my position. I show no self-sacrifice. I should have never murdered my mother.” Killian swung

low, spinning to end with an upward cut. “I should have never lost to you. I should have predicted my horse would turn her ankle. I should have never vented to Zalina. I should have done better with negotiations. I should be smarter, better, stronger.” Their swords clashed. “I should be you.”

Phineas blocked, then hacked downward. “One, you didn’t kill your mother. Two”—he hammered Killian backward—“you’re still learning. You can’t get everything right in the beginning. You were fifteen when your father wanted you to fix that unfixable situation with Tallen. You had started learning Tallenish, what, four months before that? No, three months. So of course, you wouldn’t know the language perfectly. And you should have been given a translator to assist with the negotiations since you didn’t know enough of the language for diplomatic communication. And we were ten when I beat you. Then you won three tournaments.”

“Tournaments you weren’t competing in. He only cares about the one you pulled out of.”

“When my father broke his arm?”

Killian spun. “He claims I paid you to pull out so I could win.”

“I had to go set the bone.”

“I know.” Killian advanced several paces, losing himself in the dance of the battle before Phineas lunged low.

Sidestepping the blow, Killian parried and then almost overextended his reach. “I try, Phin. I try so hard. But he demands perfection.”

Phineas chuckled, the sound prickling Killian’s irritation. “Perfect is a terrible goal, Killian. It’s unattainable.”

Killian surged forward, slicing and jabbing with each step. Phineas blocked each move deftly. With a clumsy hack, Killian grunted. “Perfect is the only way.”

“Perfect isn’t only impossible, it’s fragile. Good, wise, strong, flexible, teachable—those should be the goals. You’re human. Your allies are human. Perfect can only be said of fine porcelain teacups.” He blocked and then attacked Killian, each blow growing in strength. “Do you want to be a teacup? Breakable? Tense? Stoic? Perfect isn’t the goal. Enduring, resilient, relentless. These character traits should be what you strive for.”

He kicked Killian’s legs from beneath him and knocked him back, putting the sword to his throat. Again.

Killian threw his sword to the side, panting. He brought both palms to his eyes, pressing back the remaining emotion that brewed there. “I want his approval, Phin. I want him to be proud of me.”

“What if you never get it?”

Killian pulled his hands down, blinking. “What?”

“If you never get his approval, does that change your inherent worth? Does that change your ability to be king?”

Killian stared at Phineas’s extended hand before grasping it. What was he getting at? Phineas pulled him up, and Killian stuttered his words. “I ... well. Yes.”

Phineas sighed heavily. “Then you’re not ready to lead.”

Killian gaped at him. A voice beyond the wall called Phineas’s name. Phineas looked torn between Killian and the man.

“I need to attend to this, but let’s talk later, okay? Just ... later.” His friend looked at Killian sadly before patting his back and returning to his group. After speaking with the man, he called out the next set of instructions, leaving Killian behind as he ran to the medical tent.

Killian remained, rooted in place, panting. Cold shivered down his spine like ice. His own friend didn’t think him ready to lead. That blow was even worse than his father’s. Although, was Phineas wrong? Killian couldn’t even beat him at swordplay.

Regardless of his wins on the border or the dock dispute, Killian’s only value to his father was in his marriage to the lost princess and his subsequent succession to the throne. He had to play his father’s game, otherwise, who was he? His father

didn't care about Killian's other successes that year. He only cared that Killian was the reason the queen died. Killian had brought the cursed knife home—the curse that had killed the queen. But he couldn't change the past. He couldn't become Phineas. He couldn't undo his failures.

He stood for many moments, then stiffened his shoulders, and dusted off his clothing. If no one thought he could be king, maybe he should stop trying. He would play his part like a puppet for his father, but no more than that. He was done reaching for something no one believed he could accomplish.

Entering his chambers, he saw the stack of books Phineas had brought while he'd been at lunch. He sneered at it, about to topple the stack, but held back his hand. His mind filled with images of the forest: the light, the water ... Raela. The tension in his chest eased by a degree. He had an escape.

He snatched a book and sat in his lounging chair. He didn't want to talk to Phineas right now, but he would learn more about the gate, the forest, and the magic around the woman who had so captured his attention. His father didn't know about this venture, and Killian would never tell him. This was his secret. The king couldn't be disappointed in him if he never found out about it. He wondered for a moment if Phineas would ruin it for him, but despite everything, Phineas was Killian's friend first. He wouldn't tell. Probably.

Pushing all doubt and pain from his mind, Killian turned to search out the secrets of the forest.

CHAPTER 7

Discomfort

Killian

Teatime came much too soon for Killian, but he couldn't be late again. Shoving his third—apparently useless—book back onto the table, he straightened his shirt, grabbed his jacket, and made his way to the outer courtyard. He was so preoccupied with his futile research that when a delicate hand clasped his arm, he jumped with a start.

Lady Zalina grinned at him and moved her hand to the crook of his elbow. “Are you expecting an attack today, dear prince?” She batted her blue eyes his way, exaggerated and coquettish. Huffing a laugh, Killian straightened up and led her through the halls. Killian had last seen her in her hometown, Rosho, an icy city on the northern coast of Norwood. There she had entertained him with her sharp humor and flattered him with her flirting while he attempted to settle a dock dispute at the harbor.

“Forgive me, milady. My mind was elsewhere.”

Her other hand rested on his upper arm, hot and pressing. Her skirts swirled around her and brushed past his legs as she moved closer. “I hope not of another woman! Why, I had grand plans of wooing you this month.”

Killian blinked, his mind returning to the forest and the woman who occupied his thoughts. He answered, caging, “Myth and history, rather.”

“Oh good. The wooing can commence.” She winked at him, then laughed. “Oh, Prince Killian, don't look so stoic about the affair. You once confided in me, you recall.”

He glanced around to be sure he had no audience and, once confident they were alone, replied, “I do recall this event, yes. I told you how thick-skulled the workers and the managers of the dock were being, and it ended with a verbal lashing from my father for being thick-skulled myself. He's convinced the dispute was only solved because of your help.”

“Nonsense! The solution was all yours. I did nothing but lend a kind ear. Now I feel you pulling away from me. You play a game of chase, which is fine with me—I love to win.” She batted her kohl-lined eyes with a brilliant smile when Killian gave no response.

Her voice dropped to a quiet murmur as they arrived in the room. “Perhaps, I have caught you already. Who needs a dusty betrothal?” Her grin sharpened. “Your father should not trap you so. Are you his prisoner?”

Killian's heart twisted in his chest, her words so closely mirroring his own thoughts, but he had no chance to respond as they entered the rose garden parlor.

“Ah, here they are,” Lady Zalina's mother exclaimed as she reached for a delicate cup. “The tea has just arrived. We are having the most wonderful weather.”

The group fell into quiet, banal conversation, and Killian's mind drifted. His morning research had only rehashed things that he had learned as a child: The gate had been constructed one hundred years ago, separating the Forbidden Forest from the rest of Norwood. The histories mentioned the war and the curse of the dark forest but gave very few details.

The most interesting book had been an illustrated book of children's tales. Its tales of the last war included pictures of fairies riding giant beasts and fighting hordes of goblins. Of course, that couldn't possibly be true. Goblins? Men were already monstrous enough, so why fabricate shadow creatures? Jax, of course was a giant, sentient beast, but he was a fixture of Norwood, a variant of the local wolf species with a bit more magic than was normal. His fingers drummed as he recalled the elk and bear. Wasn't the neighboring kingdom's crest a bear? Although, he hadn't heard those creatures speak, so maybe the forest just supersized them.

He pulled up a map in his mind. In the south, on the other side of the forest rose the impassible mountain range—the Spires, as cursed as the forest it bordered. The western border had to go through Walworth already, while the east rose to the cliffs nearer Tallen. The north had fair-weather ports, but in winter they all iced up, and the boats were unusable. All travel from Norwood had to detour around this cursed forest and distant mountain range.

Hence, the hopeful trade agreement with Walworth which would give them access to the far western coast with their maritime resources and their wealthy neighbor L’Hovat.

Hence, his betrothal to a woman who had disappeared as a baby, the agreement as heavy and binding as any crown.

Lord Ryker stood to take his leave, ripping Killian from his thoughts. He turned to find Lady Zalina staring at him with a furrowed brow, but as soon as he made eye contact, her expression cleared, and her usual warmth radiated from her face. She pushed her black hair behind her shoulder.

“Shall we take a walk in the garden?” Killian asked Lady Zalina as the king escorted Lord Ryker to his carriage.

Lady Ryker nodded. “Oh do, dear ones. I have a book to finish, so you two should run along. The roses are in their last blooms of the season. Just magnificent. Mind the thorns, though. I swear they shifted to catch my gown on purpose this morning!” The woman laughed delicately, in her practiced way.

Killian smiled and offered his arm to Zalina, glad for a reason to move from his swirling thoughts. They entered the rose garden which had erupted in blooms of a hundred variants of all sizes, stem lengths, and colors, spilling around curving pathways and over the many arches. The smell was intoxicating. Maybe Killian should have brought Raela roses instead.

“They really are lovely,” Zalina murmured. “In Rosho, it is too cold to grow rose bushes. Even the pines grow slowly there.”

“It always surprises me that this distance would change the growing patterns so much. It’s only a week’s travel between us.”

“But the coastline is whipped cold by the winds, you forget. The ocean beats us so hard, the sky is always foggy, and the temperatures are never right for growing much more than potatoes.”

“Fair enough,” Killian amended. “I have but visited a few times, and on the last trip, I admit I paid little attention to flowers during my stay.”

She giggled, her cheeks flushing as she pushed her black locks from her brow. “No, on your last trip, you were paying all your attention to me.”

She was almost right. During his visit, he had spent an inordinate amount of time with her. She was pretty, new to courtly life, and utterly enraptured with him. When he wasn’t solving the dock workers’ disagreement, he had enjoyed their moments together. He had never wavered in his commitment to his betrothal, as odious as it was to him, but Zalina was a friend who seemed to like him for more than his crown. He had once admired her blue eyes, black hair, and pale complexion. Today, the sun seemed to bleach out her features. White-blonde hair flickered through his mind instead.

“Killian,” she stopped him with a hand to his chest. Cool and slender. “I’m serious about the betrothal. It’s unfair to you ... to all of us. Your father is a tyrant to bind a child to a baby. Consider the future. Consider me, Killian.” Her eyes locked on his.

He started to shake his head and respond when her face lit up with a brilliant smile. She turned away from him with a gasp. “Look! It’s a bunny, Killian. Look, a baby!” Zalina turned from him completely.

Killian stood at a loss for a moment, so thoroughly had she upended the conversation. He stepped beside her and watched the little bunny hop away under the thorns of the bush. Though it must have been the wind, he could have sworn he saw the branches shift to cover up the bunny’s escape with a gust of purple.

He frowned. The magic of the forest was certainly getting to his sensibilities. He looked to the south, toward the woman, toward the Spires that loomed over them with darkened, thrashing storm clouds that stopped at the wall of trees by the gate.

Perhaps the betrothal was as awful as he'd always thought if Zalina said the same. Perhaps he should seek out his own bride. Perhaps it could even be *her*.

Raela

With a burst of wind assisting, Raela cleared the doorstep of the leaves that had collected along the side of the house from the sudden afternoon storm. A storm that was probably her fault: Nature's response to her nightmares.

She should never nap mid-day.

Hopefully, she hadn't drenched her aunties too badly.

Auntie Toru and Auntie Mo had taken off at lunchtime, heading to the base of the Spires to collect the bright orange mushrooms and yellow squash as they did every year for their fall harvest. They always went by themselves to collect what they needed for her Surprise Birthday Soup. Always the same soup. Which hadn't bothered her before.

Life around her was ridiculously circular. Spring brought new babies, summer brought growth, fall brought harvest, and winter brought rest and a hardening of the ground that led back to spring. Should she follow the same patterns? Be as unchanging as her aunties?

Be content where she was planted?

She wished she could talk to Mother Bear, but the ancient bear was off fattening up herself and her cubs for the coming cold season. The wind brushed Raela's hair and caressed her cheek as it slipped through the trees, singing her a song of the places that it had visited, places long buried. It smelled crisp like snow.

The sun traveled from one side to the next, but she had not moved in all this time. She'd stopped exploring when Auntie Shou didn't return.

Her guilt was strong. Her desire to explore the reach of the wind was stronger. So strong it filled her head with nightmares of cages, and bars and cottages with no air.

Raela paced the cottage, her thoughts loud and her mind itching. Cleaning, baking, and magicking the fall colors to greater brilliance was not as distracting as she could have wished.

Raela turned to the bookshelves. Perhaps the answers, or an escape, were there.

The shelves were bursting with homemade covers and tomes of forest knowledge. There was a book about herbs and healing remedies written by Auntie Mo. Artwork and commentary on the local flora and fauna written by her Auntie Toru. Recipes over the years, again written by Auntie Mo. Landscapes and weather commentary by Auntie Toru. All the books they owned had been written by her aunties. Certainly, other people existed in the world. One of them—no, *two*—had even entered her forest. But no other authors sat on their shelves. She hadn't realized how odd that was before.

Raela touched Auntie Shou's books fondly. *To Dance With the Wind. The Power of Water. Light and Darkness.* All of her magical training sat in the tomes before her. And one book filled with words she didn't know, an odd addition to the rest.

Pulling out her favorite book, Raela paged through her auntie's poetry. Most of her poems were as whimsical and ridiculous as Auntie Shou. Raela set that book to the side for later. There were no answers to her questions there. Maybe Raela was just chasing after imaginary jackrabbits.

With a bang, the front door swung open, and her aunties burst in.

Auntie Toru was buried behind a massive bag of squash, vines billowing out the top like a willow. "Oh, my dear, how are you? We've missed you. Did you have a terrible day without us?"

Glancing back to the bookshelf, Raela smiled sheepishly as she stepped to take Auntie Toru's bag. "I missed you, too, Auntie. How was your journey?"

“The ground was yet hard. So many branches covered the path on the way back, as apparently the winds became upset around the middle of the afternoon. But the trees didn’t seem to mind. They needed a good trim anyhow.” Auntie Toru wiped her hands on her apron. “We could have used your wind to sweep the path, but it’s all right. We managed.”

Auntie Mo came in with two bags full of herbs and mushrooms. “Be a dear and grab this, please. We need to start hanging them immediately. The parsley seems to be a bit shrivelly, so we will aid them before they quit and turn moldy.” As she handed them to Raela, Auntie Mo patted her arm.

Raela tucked the assortment in her arms with a smile, glad to have her aunties back. As they hung the herbs and washed the mushrooms, Raela scolded herself. Her aunties were dears. Their love for her was clear. Everything they did was for her good. She should listen to them. She should be content. She loved her life and her aunties. She loved Mother Bear and the cubs.

But the very next morning, she knew she would be back in the meadow looking for a certain human man.

CHAPTER 8

Meetings

Killian

Killian woke well before dawn and walked to the gate. He still hadn't talked to Phineas and was avoiding the training grounds so he had to skip the stables. The walk through the dewy grass settled his mind more than a ride would have anyhow. The early morning birds were just starting to rouse. A gentle, northern wind cut through the meadow, but for the most part, the morning was still. The sweet smell of the damp earth should have soothed him more than it did.

Before long, he found himself staring at the dark shadows around the gate. The darkness deepened as he stared, as if all light was being sucked in, even from the lingering half-moon. Tapping his fingers on his leg, he paused.

A chuffing laugh startled him. *Only NOW you hesitate? You didn't pause so much when you first crossed.*

Clearing his throat, and stiffening his shoulders, he turned to the wolf. "Of course. I'm scouting for onlookers. No one can follow us."

Where is Phineas?

Pressing his lips together tightly, he answered, "Busy."

He didn't want to mention how he had declined to receive Phineas in his sitting room the previous evening. How the tailor had tried to start a conversation but ended up finishing his cursed fitting in silence. How badly his father cut into him or how pervasive Lady Zalina's commentary was.

Jax eyed him with great suspicion, but Killian pretended not to see it. "Let's see if our lady is there today." Killian stepped forward.

Presumptive of you, that she should arrive before the dawn.

"It's not far off. Plus, I have a way with the ladies."

Jax made a retching sound.

"Rude, Jax." Killian grumped as he opened the gate.

The chirping birds were silent as he went through the threshold. Similar to his first visit, the only sound was the crackling of pine needles. Streams of bloodless moonlight periodically slipped over him, its cool touch like water dousing his spine as he made his way through the forest. The walk to the meadow seemed longer this time. Killian held his breath, sensing the forest was doing the same. The pine trees held a tension that hadn't been there before. Or maybe the tension was within him.

"Jax?"

I feel it too.

He paused and rubbed at the gnawing, scraping sensation in his chest. "Is something wrong?"

I ... I'm not sure. The forest feels ... worried. I don't hear the maiden singing.

Killian stuttered in his step. "Is it me?"

Jax opened and shut his mouth a few times, before settling on his answer. *No. The magic is disturbed. Something is shifting.*

Killian tried to steal some of his friend's confidence that the light or the forest wouldn't smite him today and stepped forward. As they arrived in the meadow, he sighed heavily in relief. There in the center, just sitting down to pick at a lyre, surrounded by birds and little furry creatures, was the woman. The weight of the forest lifted suddenly as she struck a few strings.

His pace picked up. "Waela!"

She stopped singing and gave him a wry grin. "Raela. R—R."

She said the letter at the back of her throat, much like the nasally Tallenish with all the extra vowels and unspoken last letters. Though he had a basic knowledge of all the surrounding kingdom's languages, he had struggled most with Tallenish pronunciation. It was a major reason his negotiations had been so atrocious. This *R* was the same, even if the words were not.

Killian tried until he got it. Her smile bloomed bright just as the threads of dawn light slipped through the trees.

"Killian." She said, her *i* sounding too much like an *ee*. "Na meta ra lonmai betkunchil mea dela'aco arot hi nara wot sasen."

Jax sat with a thump, his head tilted. *Something dying? Peril? She is in trouble, maybe?*

Killian felt a flash of fear for her but before it could solidify, she grabbed his hand and pulled him down beside her. She must not mean her own death if she was so relaxed. He pulled out his notebook and pen.

Writing "Killian" and "Jax," he prepared to draw some pictures when Raela ripped the paper out of his hand, her mouth agape. "Killian, Jax." She read without prompting.

She wrote in her name, "Raelametanashi," she said, her voice was full of wonder. "E'umas bet e'papat! Na lonmai treka L'Turetian gri, ritun, Titu ranarana umas bet e'papat?"

"Jax, she can read? She can read these letters?"

It would seem obvious. Even if unlikely.

Her eyes met his, glittering, radiant, and full of hope. "Las'hi shaso'il wottas utu'as. Ra bet'ta nara'at lonmar."

She may have called you stupid. But she seems happy.

Taking in the surrounding area, she pointed to items around them and wrote the names. As they went, Killian wrote the Common translation. With each word, Raela became more enthusiastic. She repeated the sounds to herself constantly, looking up to Killian to confirm her pronunciation. Something inside Killian warmed.

Hers was true, unabashed joy.

She was unmasked and unfiltered, unlike so many around him, unlike himself. But she didn't seem foolish. Killian wondered when he had last felt happiness like the one she exuded. She felt like life itself.

When she had pointed out all the things and animals around them, she asked the animals to start acting. The rabbits jumped, the birds flew, the minks walked and ran, the fox pounced and rolled. Raela's questions were endless and voracious. Killian was enraptured by the glitter in her eye and her contagious smile. Her laughter came quickly and loudly without the usual courtly restraint. He was in the middle of showing her a picture of water and swimming when a pair of blue jays circled over her head screeching.

Her face paled, and she stood, grasping his hand to pull him up too. Patting Jax on the back, she pushed Killian in the direction of the gate. "Nami dela'aco kai. E'otu ra shum bet Kak."

Jax rushed past them. *She says someone is coming, someone she loves.*

An urgent, reedy, female voice called, "Raelametanashi! Nami aco, e'olo olit na. Olo'acotip bet dus e'shohona iyat poren'ta."

Killian nodded at Raela who smiled back at him. He winked, then dashed deep into the woods. He only realized, after he and Jax had silently made their way through the gate, that he had left his notebook and paper behind. He considered turning back, but with her gone and her ... person ... approaching, he resigned himself to return to the castle without it.

Raela felt like freedom. She felt like breathing, like peace ... or rest ...

Killian wondered at the sense of hope bubbling within him.

Raela

Raela hung her stockings on the line. After jumping into the pond to grab the fox cub that was holding onto a log, utterly refusing to let her bring him closer with her water magic, her clothes had been saturated with algae and mud. It had taken several scrubblings to get it all out.

She was responsible for all the woodland creatures, more responsible since her aunties had aged and retreated from their former duties to spend their time gardening and cooking. But leaping into the mucky end of the pond wasn't exactly what she'd planned for the day.

As she worked, Raela mentally repeated the words she had learned that morning. She kept her satchel on her, Killian's book tucked at the bottom so her aunties wouldn't find it by mistake. When they weren't around, she'd reach for it to review the spellings, but too quickly, the elk or an auntie would pop around the corner, and she'd have to hide it again.

After bathing and slipping into a clean nightgown, she called down the stairs, "I'm going to bed, Aunties!"

Auntie Toru popped her head around the corner of the living room where they were quilting. Her brows furrowed deeply. "Did you catch an illness from the pond? Are you unwell? Did you get too tired from the swim? I can make you tea."

Raela smiled, her heart as warm with affection as it was exasperated. "I'm fine, Auntie. Just heading in early because I want to start the day early."

Auntie Toru nodded, her thin reedy fingers tapping on the wall. "It's best to collect the food when the dew is still on it."
"Exactly."

Her auntie grinned. "So grown up. So mature." Her grin wobbled, and her eyes filled with tears. "Too grown up. Too old!"
"Torulonmana'at, don't even start!" Auntie Mo called out sharply. Raela couldn't see her, but knew she was in her usual place just around the corner, sitting in her old rocking chair.

Auntie Toru turned and shuffled away. "But Momo!" she whined.

Raela headed upstairs as their voices jumbled into back-and-forth bickering, shaking her head slowly. She'd heard this "discussion" many times before. Besides, it was time to study.

She flipped through the pages of Killian's book, committing each word he had written to memory. There was something familiar about the language—something warm about it. But Raela couldn't pin down what it was. When she'd had memorized all the words, she opened Auntie Shou's poetry book. She slid her fingers across her auntie's lovely script. How it made her miss her Auntie Shou.

A finch in fall is fun to see,
but the lark in March tends to be
My favorite one because in spring
it sings a song that sounds so free.

And another:

Purple pansies squeal when picked,
perhaps they did not like my lick.

Raela snorted. Her auntie was absurd. Turning the page, she paused when she read the lines of her favorite lullaby.

Run little mink, the storm is on its way.
Rest from your hunting and go another day.
The lightning is flashing, the wind is yet fierce,
but sleep in your cave, safe and unpierced.

Had Auntie Shou written this? She could almost hear Auntie Shou singing it. Raela flipped through another few pages, enjoying how, in some small way, they connected her to her long-lost auntie. Yawning, she turned the last page. Her eye caught on the final poem.

Silent forest, blackened clouds, a squealing wind, then thunder sounds.
Coming, coming, coming fast. I do not think that I will last.
So bind the window, catch the latch, our little frame cannot be matched,
I will stand within the storm. I will go, she'll not be torn.

Ice trickled down Raela's spine as she finished the poem. She read it a few more times but then heard Auntie Mo's heavy footsteps on the stairs. Blowing out the candle, Raela tucked herself under her covers, hiding the book beneath her pillow. Auntie Mo passed by after a brief pause and the rapid, shuffling steps of Auntie Toru followed behind.

Raela opened her eyes and stared into the dark. She tried to shake the feeling, tried to remember that the auntie who wrote poems about terrifying storms also licked pansies—that she was crazy, unstable, goofy, and odd. But even though Raela planned to rise before the sun, it was several hours before she finally drifted off to sleep.

CHAPTER 9

Never enough

Killian

For a week, the pile of books that Phineas left for him continued to grow daily. Each book added to Killian's guilt over ignoring and avoiding his friend. Each one also served as a reminder that Phineas didn't think Killian was ready to lead Norwood. By the second week, the books had stopped coming. Excuses filled his mind, but Killian knew Phineas wasn't being petty. Killian was embarrassed that he might be.

His days were spent with Raela in the morning, Lady Zalina at teatime, and afternoon meetings between nobles, the head chef, the tailor, and the head butler—all of them bombarding him with questions about his quickly approaching wedding.

He tried and often failed to focus on his kingdom's issues. The Isle negotiations were going well, but crops of Norwood were still struggling this harvest, worsened by a recent hot wind from the west that resulted in even lower than usual rainfall. Thankfully, the ships in the north were finishing their final trades without delay. The harbors should be ready to close safely before the harsh winter season. Just last week, Killian had instructed the messenger to gather seven of the best soldiers to go prepare the docks and secure the ships.

His father, of course, still ran the meetings, refusing to let him lead, but Killian idly threw in ideas, even if he'd left his heart behind the gate. His suggestions garnered nods from the other advisors. Unfortunately, there was no sign of affirmation from his father.

His mind drifted toward the forest. Raela was learning Common at an impressive pace, rapidly applying all he taught her. This morning he had brought a book of words and his favorite children's books so she could keep practicing. Her wide eyes and bouncing heels were enough to express her delight, but his skin still tingled from her sudden hug hours later.

If his father didn't think him an adequate prince, at least he was a good teacher.

Once the final meeting of the day adjourned, Killian grabbed his papers and skirted around his father's chair to go study more of Raela's language. As he passed, the king held up his hand to stop him.

"Killian, hold for a moment."

The room emptied quickly as Killian slowly spun on his heel, his throat tight. "Yes, Father?"

The king signed another document and passed it to the servant with a tilt of his head. The man bowed and skittered out of the room. With a sigh, the king stroked his beard and turned toward his son. "As you know, the harvest is coming to an end. And it has been eighteen years since your betrothal was first signed into being."

Killian's heart sank, and he shifted his hands behind his back. "I'm aware."

"The king and queen of Walworth are coming in two weeks' time. For the wedding."

Killian blinked. "Has the princess returned then?" Killian stepped forward, his brow furrowed and his skin icy. "The king and queen have brought her back from hiding?"

The king pushed his pen to the top of a paper, squaring it off. Seconds passed. "No."

Killian started to speak, but hesitated. "So ... are we to go through the ceremony without the bride?" Killian couldn't stop the scoff. "Am I to marry the paper the treaty is written on? Perhaps the feather pen. The desk? How can I be betrothed, much less married, without a princess in the flesh?"

Glaring up through silver, wiry brows, the king pointed at him. "Don't be rude. It doesn't become a prince. She will be here. They said she would."

"How can you say that?" Killian tossed his papers onto the table. "Eighteen years, she's been gone. Not hours. Years! How can you trust that they haven't lost her?"

The king stood, his movement slow and dangerous. His chair whined as his legs pushed it backward. “Jonat of Walworth is my oldest friend. We were almost raised together, we fought together, and he is the most trustworthy human on this continent. Do you think me so great a fool that I would offer our land to a monarch I didn’t trust? That I would hand over the wealth of two countries to our children if I didn’t have absolute confidence in his character? In our friendship? In our treaty? They loved your mother as well, lest you forget. It was her idea in the first place, and I will keep my promise to her!”

“You don’t think I’m ready to lead a meeting, not to mention inherit your throne or manage two kingdoms. You’ll probably rule the united kingdoms, and I’ll just be your puppet.”

“Of course you’re not ready!”

Killian rolled his head on his shoulders to dispel the surge of anger. “Of course? Do you not hear what I contribute to these meetings? Do you not see how the advisors respond to my recommendations? Do you not see how much I prepare?”

“What I see is a boy who is happy when the sun is out. But when things get hard, when you face a struggle, you quit.”

“I do not—”

“You have quit your whole life, son. After debating with Lord Godfrey this spring, you developed an illness on the day of the vote. When L’Hovat wanted to fight the trade agreements in the treaty, where were you? You were suddenly absent from the meetings.”

“I had to go to the northern outpost to fix an internal disruption.”

“You left to hide behind Lady Zalina.”

“Father!” Killian threw his hands in the air. “I was addressing the docking issues in the north and helping solve disagreements over trade!”

“I’m not blind, nor am I an idiot!” The king seethed. “Being a king is about endurance, patience, and wisdom. This is a job where you must fight for every victory, and never give up in the face of loss. You must never run. Never skirt the issues. You must fight. But you, you quit.” The king thumped his finger onto the table with each word. “You’re not ready.”

Killian reeled, Phineas’s own doubtful words ringing again. “Maybe you’re just afraid I’ll be a better king than you.”

“I hope you’ll be better than me. But you’re not yet ready.”

Ripping his papers off the table, Killian whirled and paced to the door. “I don’t quit. It’s not true. And you know it.”

His father called after him. “If you don’t quit when things are hard, then where, may I ask, is Lord Phineas?”

Killian halted for a moment before continuing on his way. “Goodbye, Father.” He pulled the door shut.

He stormed to his room, as the servants scurried out of his way. He didn’t quit. How else could he have become the best fighter among his men? Well, except for Phineas. How else could he have come up with solutions to so many of the recent disputes? And though Killian had to admit he’d pulled back at the meetings recently, that was his father’s fault.

Once back in his room, he furiously scratched out a plan that he hoped would appease the metalworkers to submit to Lord Farsha. Then, he grabbed his notebook and headed toward the gate. Perhaps his anger would help him learn her language faster. At least Raela didn’t think him a failure.

“You look like a bear bit by bee.” Raela said with a laugh. She put out her hands, like claws, and made a furious expression. “So angry. What makes so you angry?”

Killian and Raela sat on a blanket in the meadow, the birds just now waking as the sun started its slow ascent. He automatically responded, ““You look like a bear stung’—bees sting, not bite. And it should be, ‘Why are you so angry?’” Raela nodded thoughtfully as she jotted his corrections down.

“Good. Now why are you so angry?” she asked. Her head tilted to the side like a bird, her long blonde hair almost silver in the early light. Her hand moved reflexively to pet the scruff around Jax’s neck. Jax nestled in closer to her. Killian might have been jealous if he wasn’t so distracted by his father. And by Phineas.

“People, men, do not think I am a good leader.” When she frowned, he expanded, searching for an easy explanation. “Good teacher, good boss, uh ... good ...”

Alpha, father. Jax offered, his mind speaking into both of theirs, accompanied by images.

“A front goose?” Raela said, her hands making a V shape. “Front goose moves many.”

“Sure, just like that. A leader guides his people.”

Glancing down, Raela studied the words again before looking around the meadow. “Where is the big man? Isn’t he one of your people?”

Killian rolled his shoulder. “Phineas is my friend. He is one of the people who thinks I am not a good front goose. Not a good leader.”

“Does Phineas ... see right? Are you not a good leader?”

Killian lay down in the grass with a huff. “I think I’m a good one. But Phin and my father do not. I know I’m not perfect, but I try. All I’ve ever done was try, and it was never enough.”

Raela stared at him for a long time. Each passing moment made him feel more exposed. She inhaled slowly. “Does Phineas make you sad?”

He clenched his jaw, debating how to answer. He chose honesty. “Yes.”

She glanced back down at her book. “If Phineas is a friend, why you not *shillet*, um, let go of sadness? If he or you made a mistake, say sorry and say *shillet* together?”

I think she means forgive. The image is of a bound and shackled person set free.

Killian glanced up at her, the conviction in his heart clenching his chest painfully. Looking at Jax who was staring back at him with a raised brow, he sighed again, but crossed his arms. He wasn’t ready. “Forgive him.”

Raela nodded, looking pleased with herself, as if they were in agreement. But his heart ached. “My father will never forgive me. I think that’s why he hates me so much.”

She frowned, then reached for his hand. “Something happened in the past?”

Killian clenched his jaw, clicking his back teeth together, debating whether or not she would blame him. But her gaze displayed curious empathy, and he felt burdened. He glanced at Jax. “Jax would you show her as I speak?” The wolf had been there beside him through it all. When the wolf nodded, Killian cleared his throat.

“My mother’s death is my fault. When I was seven, I ran to a lake north of the castle and was playing in the water. A glint of light on the shore caught my eye, and I came back to find a jewel-covered dagger. Jax howled at me to stop, but he was too late, I had already grasped the handle.” He exhaled a huge breath. “My hand immediately started turning black, and a curse curled up my arm, heading toward my heart.”

Jax’s images overwhelmed Killian as they reflected the story in his mind. Jax throwing Killian across his furry back, the cursed arm held in Jax’s maw as he raced back to the castle. “A foreign magician was visiting from Walworth, and he tried to extract the curse. I saw something like ink or oil hovering between us as he tried to transfer it into a glass container. But for some reason, he lost control of it. It rushed back toward my chest, but my mother threw herself over me, and it struck her

instead.” He could still see his mother’s face as horror and love intermingled. Jax showed her sad smile as she patted Killian’s cheek.

“She whispered, ‘I will always be with you.’ And then she ... she died.” Killian could hardly push air, much less any additional words past the lump in his throat. He blinked back the stinging tears. Raela squeezed his hand, and he saw tears streaking down her face.

“My father blames me for her death. And ...” Killian wiped his brow. “He’s not wrong. If I hadn’t gone to the lake, or if I had listened to Jax and not touched it.” He swallowed. “If I had pushed her out of the way, found a way to take back the curse. Then he wouldn’t have lost her.”

She placed two hands on either side of Killian’s face, her thumbs brushing his cheeks. “He is wrong, Killian. Father is wrong. You were little. She took care of you. She was guardian of you. She *klatmam*—”

Protected.

“She protected you. That is life and care ... that is ... waname.”

Love? Jax asked Raela.

She glanced at Jax, then back at Killian. Jax flooded their minds with mother birds feeding their babies, fathers hugging their children, grandmothers wrapping a scrapped knee, and two sisters embracing. Raela nodded and whispered as her eyes locked with his. “Love. She loves you.”

Killian’s skin burned hot under her touch, the tingles from her gaze piercing through to his soul. Grief bubbled fresh, but her words were a balm.

She continued, “I know only a little, but I think you need to *shillet*, to forgive you also. Be free again.” She drew herself toward him and wrapped her arms around his neck. His arms clenched around her waist. Her hair was soft on his face and scented like mint and sage. Like his mother had smelled. Maybe all wonderful women smelled this way. Her grip was fierce and unyielding. Restoring.

He took several deep breaths, releasing the agony with each exhale. Slowly she pulled back and sat beside him again, picking at the clovers. “Maybe I also need to listen,” she began.

“When I was little, I went walking beyond the borders my aunties made for me. Got lost in the river valley. Mother Bear and Aunties looked for me. In my fear, I used magic to send water and light into the sky, and Auntie Momo and Auntie Toru find me, but ...” Killian watched her lip tremble. “When we walk home, Auntie Shou was not there. She is still lost because I walk too far.”

Killian grasped her hand and with the other drew her chin up with the edge of his finger. “Perhaps we both need to forgive ourselves. *Shillet*.”

She nodded. “When we are given shillet, we must give it to others also, Killian.”

Killian knew exactly what she was getting at. Perhaps she was right. He would think about forgiving Phineas, of course. Maybe his father. Maybe even himself.

“We all make mistakes. We keep ... keep ...” Her brow furrowed, and Killian clenched his fist to restrain himself from brushing the line with his thumb.

“Keep trying?” he asked.

“Keep living. Cannot be in the past. The flowers cannot grow backward. The rivers do not flow uphill. The water does not stay in place. So we also cannot. Life moves forward.”

His gaze drifted north toward the castle and his duty and his treaty and his father. How long had he been trying? How long had he been ignored? Her voice drew his attention back.

“Think long, Killian. The seasons are too short to stay stuck in the mud of spring.” The sun was now hot on their backs. “I need to go to my aunties now. Carry water, make morning food.”

“Breakfast.”

“Make breakfast.” She beamed at him, and in a moment, she grabbed his hand and squeezed it. “I am happy you are in our forest with me, Killian.”

A warm rush flooded his chest as electricity tingled through his fingertips where she touched him. He huffed a laugh. “I am happy, too, Raela. Very happy.”

She squeezed his hand again before running off to the southern edge of the meadow, turning once with a wave just before she ducked into the brush. Killian felt a sharp pain at her notable absence. She never made him feel foolish. Never disregarded him. His heart warmed, even as it ached after her company.

Even if her advice cut him to the marrow.

He turned to leave and found himself face-to-face with the massive wolf who was pinning him with a sharp look of reproof. His pupils narrowed, and his nose twitched side to side. *Killian, be careful. Your betrothal.*

Killian waved him off and stepped around him. “Jax, you don’t understand marriage or betrothals.”

I do understand promises. Your family promised. Promises matter.

“Don’t worry your little canine head. I’m just teaching her our language. Making international friendships.”

Jax huffed in what sounded like a scoff. *And I’m just here for the scratches.*

“You do love the scratches, though.” Killian shot one last glance toward the place she had disappeared as he pushed himself up and headed home.

Jax paced beside him. *They are quite nice. But I didn’t make any promises.*

Rolling his eyes, Killian dismissed Jax’s worries from his mind. So far, they had developed a lovely, honest friendship, without the weight of royalty. This was all he was after. Who else besides Phineas and Jax could Killian count as true friends? He could use one more. Jax was worrying for nothing. Killian stifled the memory of her hand in his, the squeeze of her hug, and the feel of her waist under his palm. He struggled to stifle the hot-red coal that was starting to burn in his chest.

Maybe he was in trouble after all.

CHAPTER 10

A Kiss For the Pain

Killian

Killian led Zalina around the gardens as was their custom after tea. The leaves were just turning yellow and red, but as Zalina held onto Killian's arm, he realized that the colors had nowhere near the vibrance of the Forbidden Forest. There, leaves glittered as if made of gold and rubies, and the green of the grass was a true emerald or as vibrant as jade. The leaves here were a sallow, bile shade.

The company paled in comparison as well.

Zalina giggled again at something he had said. Something he hadn't meant as a joke. She batted a hand against his shoulder and brought herself close, pressing her chest into him.

"How is it you speak so highly of this wolf, but I haven't met him," she whined, her pitch high and nasally. "I have seen him duck away when you come back inside, but no one has thought to introduce us. I swear I've never been jealous like I am of a furry beast who gets all your time!" She laughed again. "My maid says that you even talk to the creature! If he talks back, then I must know this novel beast."

Killian frowned. His skin pricked at her closeness, so he turned to give them space by walking the opposite way. Jax was as well-known and accepted on the castle grounds as the statues, fountains, and busts of his relatives. But he never lingered. Glancing down at Zalina, he nearly agreed to their meeting, but a wave of resistance held him back. "Perhaps another time," he hedged. "He's a busy wolf."

Her eyes fluttered coquettishly, but they held no sparkle. Her hands were soft, but too soft, like undercooked eggs, pale and floppy. Her black hair glimmered, but it didn't shine with its own inner radiance like the sun.

Unlike *her*. Unlike Raela. Raela who lit the entire meadow with her joy and inner brilliance.

Zalina asked what he was wearing to the harvest ball in a few days, prattling on about her clothing, drawing lines down her corset with her fingers as she described the outfit. Feverishly working for his attention and approval.

Had she always been this desperate? Had he always acquiesced to this pouting fervor? Is this what he had thought friendship was?

The affirmative answer was likely. Killian shifted uncomfortably.

It was as though he had been sustained by bland porridge or dry bread his whole life and thought he was living well. Now he had tasted lemon or basil, a steak or a raspberry. He realized with a dawning sense of clarity that he couldn't go back to where he'd been. He couldn't be satisfied with mere survival. He wanted to *thrive* and live with Raela's kind of vigorous delight.

He wanted Raela. He wanted her clever mind and her friendship. He wanted her to hold him accountable to making things right with Phineas.

Phineas.

Killian clenched his jaw, pulsing the muscle before turning to Zalina. "Please excuse me, I just remembered I need to communicate a message to Lord Phineas. It's urgent. I shall see you tomorrow?"

Zalina smiled at him tightly and dipped into a shallow curtsy. As she turned, Killian imagined he saw a feral look unfitting for a court lady. But as she walked away, full of composure, he was certain he imagined it. He must have seen a bit of hurt, which was to be expected.

He rushed over to the training grounds, searching for his friend. He swept through all the usual haunts before finally asking the weapon master's apprentice.

"Nathan, where is Lord Phineas?"

“Your Highness?” He turned his hat about, as if struggling to find the words. “You ... you asked for a small squadron to secure the northern harbor before the freeze. He left about six days ago.” Six days with no additions to Killian’s book pile. That explained it.

Killian closed his eyes. Of course he had. Killian hadn’t asked for Phineas specifically, but the shipyards were perilous and required a strong leader to keep the men safe. So of course, Phineas had volunteered. A pang of guilt hit him.

Muttering his thanks, Killian slunk back to his room. He was finally ready to—what was that word? *Shillet*?—to let free his friend from the bitter jail Killian had held him in. To apologize, to gain Phineas’s forgiveness, to release his own bitterness, but due to his own orders, he was unable to restore the friendship today. If only Killian had gone himself or gone with Phineas instead of fleeing into the forest, or whatever other excuses he had conjured, everything could have already been fixed. Dejected, Killian eyed the remaining tower of unread books. As penance and an apology, Killian would read everything Phineas had brought him even while Killian had petulantly ignored him.

He dragged his hand down his face. Petulant indeed. Killian resolved in his heart to do better next time. Hopefully, Phineas would come home soon, and he could fix this mess he had made.

Lady Zalina hounded his steps. His father glared daggers at him. The tailors seemed to lie in wait behind every corner. For some reason, the butler needed to know his opinion on drapery colors and napkins. The castle buzzed with his impending wedding celebration. The changing of seasons also meant more harvest balls and kowtowing to the nobility. Every other night Killian was expected to smile and pretend. And the women didn’t hold back their false smiles, hiding their heartbreak behind a flicker of hope as his wedding ceremony approached and still no bride appeared.

Killian continued to run toward the one person who accepted him just as he was. She didn’t understand charm even when Killian accidentally used it. His flowers confused Raela. His wink made her ask him if there was a bug in his eye. His best lines didn’t translate well at all, though they did make her laugh. She just ... accepted him. Seemed to like him as he was, even when he was clumsy or unrefined.

Unlike Zalina, when Raela touched him, there was no subterfuge or sneaky attempts to woo him for the position as his queen. There was no crown weighing them down with all the responsibilities and falsehoods that held. He was just a man.

A man who was falling for her.

Killian wasn’t even sure why he should stop himself anymore.

They lay in the grass, staring at the puffs of clouds, guessing the animal each one looked like, sometimes followed by badly drawn pictures from Killian to expand their words. Since she was learning Common so well, he tried to pick up L’Turetian in return.

Killian kicked himself for overlooking an ancient journal Phineas had unearthed from the library several weeks ago. It was nearly the same language, but the script had been hard to read and the papers so fragile that he had passed over it. Maybe soon he would know enough words to translate it. One passage said something about licking a flower, which meant he was probably mistranslating already. He’d forgotten it but would bring it with him next time to ask for Raela’s help.

The grass smelled fresh and sweet, especially next to her. Killian threaded his fingers over the grass as Raela talked in Common about everything and nothing. It all sounded like music to him.

He sucked in a sharp breath and sat up, drawing up his finger to examine it. The grass had cut him, thinly shearing his fingertip. Blood welled up immediately.

“Ow,” Killian said at the same time Raela said, “Ach!”

She reached for him and pulled out a handkerchief, dabbing at the blood. “Remember what I taught you about the grass,” she chided. “Witch’s Blade looks pretty and grows fast, but it has its name for a reason. Don’t confuse it for Blueseed.”

Don’t be an idiot, Killian. Jax snorted as he rolled over beside them, his legs were in the air, bent at the paws.

“This will help.” Still holding the fabric, she bent and kissed the tip of his finger. “There, have a ... what is this?” She made a kiss sound again as she pointed to her lips.

Killian swallowed against the sudden dryness of his throat. “A kiss.”

She kissed his finger again. “There, a kiss for a ...” She looked at him, as if she were trying to remember, then her eyes brightened. “For the pain.”

He whispered, “A kiss for the pain.” But he was transfixed on the tingle that the kiss left on his fingertip which traveled up his arm, through his chest, and prickled the skin on the back of his neck.

“Better?” She grinned at him, and he nodded, so she pulled his hand into her lap, even as her gaze shifted to the dark clouds that hovered over the tall mountain peaks to the south. They were barely visible over the high trees around the meadow, but their peaks looked jagged and menacing. She idly played with his fingers, careful to avoid the cut.

Tilting her head toward it, she said, “The wind is cold. A storm sits on the mountain.”

Killian watched the ashy, lenticular cloud as it hovered over the highest peaks, the darkness of the cloud’s base strikingly ominous. Killian shifted uncomfortably, his pending ceremony intruding into his peaceful thoughts. The clouds mirrored his own internal turmoil. “Good thing it’s still far off.”

Her fingertips tapped on his palm, which she still had in her grasp, her gaze distant. “Will you come to me even when there is snow?”

He smiled, though his heart lurched at the promise. “I will come to you even if there are feet and feet of snow.”

“You only have two feet,” Raela said with a frown.

Killian chuckled. “I meant, even if the snow comes up to here”—he held his hand above his head—“I will still come.”

“That is too much snow, and that has not happened many times in the past.” She tilted her head, considering. “But if that much snow, I will come too. Jax will be warm, so I will sit by Jax. Just like I have kept warm with Mother Bear, I mean, Klatma, before her long sleeps.”

I like this plan, Jax said from beside them. *I am an excellent cuddler.*

“You have softened in your old age!” Killian exclaimed at his furry friend. “You never cuddle with me.”

Killian reached his free hand toward his friend who rolled away with a shake of his head. *You have never asked. Nor do you smell as good.*

Raela giggled, and the birds twittered back a lyrical song in response to her laughter. “What is cuddle?”

“It’s like a hug, only you hold on for a long time.” Killian scratched at his face, when she looked confused, then he stood and held open his arms. “If you were to do the same to me, this would be a hug.”

Raela rose to her feet and held her arms open to the sides as well, a few feet away. “This is a hug?”

Killian approached her, and his heart pounded. “No, like this. Like you did when I was sad.” He slowly wrapped her in his arms. She reached back around him as well and snuggled her head against his chest. Killian’s throat closed with a sudden swell of emotion.

Raela murmured, her voice muffled by his vest, “Like this?”

“Yes.” Killian’s voice was thick and low. “This is a hug. Do this for a long time, and that is cuddling.”

She pulled away slowly from Killian, casting a brilliant smile with flushed cheeks before she turned to the wolf. She tucked her hair behind her ear. “Jax, will you cuddle with me when there is snow?”

Of course.

Killian raised his brow at his friend. “Aw, Jax, what about me?”

Absolutely not. You’re only asking because she did. You told me you were too old for cuddling when you were ten. Killian grinned, but he wondered if that had been the last time he had been close to anyone. His father certainly didn’t hug him.

“Do not worry, Killian. I will cuddle you,” Raela said.

His cheeks pulled tighter in a smile with her sweetness, but Killian did worry. Exceedingly. There was no one else that Killian wanted to be that close to. The strength of his desire to be with Raela struck him hard, and he felt suddenly vulnerable. But his betrothal, his duty. He looked at her again. His heart.

Raela, mercifully oblivious, sat again and picked up the latest book he had brought her. “Killian, read to me. I like your voice.” She settled her head back onto her hands and closed her eyes, a picture of true peace.

“I’m happy to read to you.” He collapsed into the grass next her and began, trying to lose himself in the story. Anything to distract him from the storm of emotions inside.

CHAPTER 11

Affection

Raela

Several days later, Raela and Killian walked in their usual pattern around the border of the meadow. He never asked to go farther, and she never offered to take him past the brush. They were cloistered in their secret, special place. To take him past the line of brush would ruin the spell. Under the hot sun, cooled by the autumn breeze, and engrossed in their mutual study of languages, Raela was perfectly at peace, and perfectly distracted—even if her aunties were crazy and had started her birthday soup this morning—a whole day early.

She watched his scruff as it was pulled taut over the corner of his jaw, the muscle beneath pulsing, struggling to pronounce the full names of her and her aunties. His face was so sharp and angular, more similar to Jax's than her own round one. Her cheeks were soft to her fingertips, and she wondered how his short facial hair stayed so short. It had felt rough but not unpleasant when she'd touched it before. She made a fist to hold back the impulse to do so again. His neck was threaded with thick muscles, like cords of trees that grew from a shared root with shoulders twice as broad as hers and arms wider than her splayed hand. His green-gray eyes reminded her of crystalline frost on the winter pine needles and they were wholly focused on her. Her heart trilled under his attention.

“Why are your names so long?” he asked.

She shrugged. “Our names are words combined. Prayers from our families. The meanings are often discovered throughout our lives, after events, or sometimes they show up as character traits.”

His brow furrowed. “So, what does your name mean then?”

Raela bunched up her nose. “I do not like it. Raela means break into many, many pieces; meta is bright light at end of a long, dark tunnel; and nashi means rest like sleep.”

Jax sat up, one eyebrow raised. *I think that in Common, meta is the word for hope.*

Killian gathered his thoughts. “So shatter, hope, and rest?” he asked. She nodded. “That is an odd prayer.”

“Yes. Why shatter? Why is that my name?” Raela smiled in exasperation. “My aunties say that maybe it is, ‘May what was broken find the light and rest,’ or ‘shatter the curses, and run to the light.’ Or maybe, ‘Even though you may break, push to the light and find your rest.’ But neither of those sound very happy to me. Who wants to be shattered or in a dark tunnel? But the magic of the forest told Auntie Shou these words, so”—she shrugged—“they are my name now.”

“And your aunties? What are their names?”

“Motukalatabeli, which means ‘moment, strong, and worry.’ Very fitting for her bustling, worrying self. And Torulonmana’at means ‘why, know or stone, and in the past.’ Shourentameta’il is ‘courage, oppose, and future.’ So long.” She laughed. “I call them Auntie Mo, Auntie Toru, and Auntie Shou mostly. What does Killian mean?”

Killian paused in his step. “Little Warrior. It was my grandfather’s name, and his grandfather’s, and his grandfather’s.”

“Many great leaders,” she said. “It is nice you have so many ancestors’ prayers with you.”

One side of Killian’s lips lifted, his eyes glittering. “Many great first gooses.”

Raela snorted and batted at his shoulder. “It is a great example of leading.”

“It is,” he said with an exhale.

“The first goose works the hardest. Has the plan.”

“He is supposed to.” Killian kicked at a mushroom. “But if they don’t think I can do it, maybe I don’t even want to be first goose. Maybe I could just stay here. Sit on the grass.”

She giggled and tugged on his hand to pull them to the ground. “Like this? Sit with me?” She started to pull her hand away as they landed in the grass, but he held on tighter. His gaze locked on their entwined fingers.

His voice was low, and barely audible above the breeze. “Like this. With you,” he said.

Her heart thrummed like a hummingbird, beating out of her chest as her cheeks scorched hotter than the rays of sunlight. Her chest tightened, and she swallowed. Her aunties had no books about this. She knew the forest creatures often came in pairs of male and female, but nothing prepared her for the flush of emotions and heat that she felt when he looked at her like that. Killian huffed and slipped his grasp away from hers before pressing his palms against his eyes. He collapsed onto his back.

“Raela ... I ...” He hesitated.

Her heart was thudding harder if that were possible. She was about to speak when Jax lay down beside Killian, nudging him with his nose. She could tell he was speaking, but unlike previous occasions, he spoke his words to Killian alone. She frowned. What would the ancient wolf be keeping from her?

Killian glared at Jax, but then his eyes closed. “I’ll talk to him. Help him see reason.”

“Who?” Raela asked, pulling a strand of a flower through her fingers. “Who will you talk to?”

Killian sat up and took her hands back in his. Her mind and soul buzzed with pleasure, almost masking his next words. But as he spoke, all the world fell away except for him. “Raela, I know we have only known each other for a short time, but you are the most amazing woman I have ever met. You are beautiful, graceful, and clever enough to pick up a language in mere weeks. Your smile is brighter than the sun.” He leaned forward. “I can’t imagine anyone in my life, anyone in my future, except you.”

Her throat dried the words on her tongue. His gaze scorched her, so full of want and attention and ... affection? But it felt nothing like her aunties’ affection.

“I’ll be back after talking with my father. Tonight at sunset. Will you meet me here?”

A thousand thoughts whirled through her mind, but steady and unmoved was her utter enjoyment of his company. If he was asking to spend more time with her, the answer was easy. “Yes. I will be here at sunset.”

Killian burst into a wide smile, and he leaned toward her, his thumb drifting along her jaw. When he brushed her hair behind her ear, his touch burned like fire, but then his eyelids fell halfway down his irises and his lips pushed out slightly. He paused, three fingerbreadths away from her face, like he was waiting.

Her mind whirled with his closeness. His hand still pressed against her head and neck and burned like the summer sun against her skin. She studied the lines of his face, enjoying the sensation of his body close to hers. But she wasn’t sure what he was doing, or what he expected from her. Her brows furrowed in a moment of embarrassed realization that she was missing something. His breath was hot on her lips. She whispered, “What are you doing?”

Killian pulled back in surprise, his brows ducking into the hair that had fallen forward onto his forehead. Behind him, Jax collapsed to the earth in a wheezing, wolfy laugh, his maw gaping open as his tail beat behind him.

Killian’s face lit with a pinkness that darkened his cheeks. She studied the wave of color. “I was—” He cleared his throat. “That is, I was going to see if—”

Jax spoke in their minds, *He was going to push his face to yours. Lip to lip. Kiss your face.*

Raela brought her fingertips to her mouth as it burst into tingles. “Lip to lip?” That sounded surprisingly nice.

Killian’s face was now as red as a rose. “Have you never seen people kiss? Been kissed?”

“No. My aunties do not kiss lips. Kiss wounds, hurts, bruises, yes, but not lips.”

Jax was still grinning. Killian’s face softened and he smiled as well, chuckling under his breath. “Okay, well then. Let’s back up. When two people like each other, sometimes they kiss to show the other person they like them.”

“Why not just say the words?”

Yes. Why, Killian? Jax was now on his belly, head on his paws looking up at Killian with a toothy grin. *Tell us the details of courtship.*

“Jax, I don’t need your help.”

Raela turned more fully to them. “Curship?”

“Courtship,” Killian corrected. “It’s when a man tells a woman that he likes her and wants to be with her and her alone.”

“Like the swans?”

Jax snorted but agreed. *Like mates*, he said.

That pink color returned to Killian’s cheeks. “Yes. Something like that.” Killian dragged a hand across the back of his neck. “With humans, sometimes they bring flowers, or food, or hold hands, or kiss, all before making a promise of marriage, which is where the two people stand in front of other people and promise to be mates.”

Her eyebrows went up as her eyes flashed from Jax to Killian. “You want to be my mate?”

Killian considered this for only a moment before his grin fell back into his lazy sideways smile. “Yes. I want to be your mate.”

“We can be mates.” The answer was easy. Her heart was wholly convinced that she wanted to spend every day with this man, just as she had spent every day with him for the last stretch of time. “Does this mean we are marriage now?”

Shaking his head with amusement, Killian shifted to his knees. “No, we are not married yet. For humans, there is a big gathering. Now, I need to talk to my father, to get out of ... a promise ... and to bring you out of this forest. It would be unfair to rip you from here and toss you to the wolves without preparation. No offense, Jax.”

An immense amount of offense is taken. Court is not like wolves. Wolves do not act like those horrible creatures.

Killian dragged his fingers across the fur on Jax’s head. “I will talk with my father and return for you, Raela.”

Her heart lightened. He was coming back. “At sunset?”

“At sunset.”

“And then, will you kiss me?” she asked, her heart pounding at the thought.

He grasped her hand to help her stand, then traced the lines of her palm with his finger. Raela was enraptured at the delicate touch. Each stroke raced up her arm to touch her soul. “I will. When you want me to.” He glanced up at her face, studying her with such attention. “May I kiss your hand? Where I come from, men do this with the women they want to court.”

She nodded. In a moment, he brought his lips to the back of her hand and pressed them to her skin. Her heart burst at the warmth and grew hotter as she thought about his lips touching hers. Undoubtedly, her cheeks were as red as Killian’s had been before. Her heart delighted in every moment.

He looked up from her hand with a smile. “Until next time.” He released her and moved toward the edge of the meadow. With a final wave, they disappeared into the dark shadows of the pines.

Raela watched the forest for some time. Her cheeks tingled. Her heart refused to settle back into a normal cadence. The place where he had kissed her hand burned. Mates. No, *marriage*. Courtship. He was coming back again *tonight*. They would be together, and he wouldn’t leave her ever again. Would he move into her cottage? She shook her head. It was too short for him. They would need somewhere else, somewhere taller. Would she go with him? To his father’s house?

A thrill of excitement shivered through her. She would finally step out of the forest. She would finally go *out*—out of the pattern of her life, out to change and to explore. She would finally get to see other people and women and men. She would be with Killian, and they would be together forever. It was everything she had wanted and more.

Her joy was irrepressible. With a giggle she gathered up the notebook, jotting down a few more things before she tucked it into her satchel. She danced slowly through the tall grasses, singing to herself as she brushed the tall dry stems with her

fingertips. The wind danced, filling the air around her with seeds and petals.

As she approached the path that led home, she looked back toward the northern pines ... where he had disappeared. A yawning hole gnawed at her chest, aching for him. She scolded herself. He would be back. He'd promised.

She pulled aside the bush and moved to step into the oaks when her steps faltered and her smile fell. Auntie Mo and Auntie Toru stood before her alongside the ancient elk. Auntie Mo was bristling, her arms crossed and her face covered in the most disappointed frown that Raela had ever seen. Auntie Toru was biting at her nails and bouncing on her heels while her eyes brimmed with tears.

The air left her lungs in a whoosh as her heart settled into her gut like a stone.

They had seen everything.

CHAPTER 12

Fractured

Raela

Raela froze in place. Time halted as even the birds withdrew their song. Beyond her aunties, sitting with her subdued cubs, Mother Bear huffed. Mo cast her a glare before stepping forward.

“What in the heavens and earth and seas are you doing? Who is that wolf? Who is that man? Why is he touching you? Why is he in this forest? Did I not forbid you from speaking to or welcoming anyone in the forest this autumn?”

Auntie Toru began to wail, her crooning more like that of a loon than a human. “It’s too late. Too late! The storm is coming! The curse is knocking. The doors have opened.”

“You don’t even know what you’ve done!” Auntie Mo shouted at Raela over her sister. “We found four nearly completed mushroom circles on our way here. You’ve been neglecting your most important duty! Because of a *man*!”

Auntie Toru was rocking back and forth, holding her stomach. “Too late. Too old. Too late. Too old! We knew it was coming. We knew.”

“Torulonmana’at, cease your screeching!” Auntie Mo whirled on her sister. “I cannot think or speak with you blubbling!” With a squeaking pip, Auntie Toru placed her knobby fingers over her mouth and turned away. Auntie Mo huffed a breath and reached for Raela’s hand. But Raela stepped back. She had never seen Auntie Mo so livid in her life. When she glanced down, her auntie’s hand was trembling. That’s when Raela noticed how wide her auntie’s eyes were, their whites completely visible, and realized—Auntie Mo was *afraid*.

“Aunties.” Raela found her voice. “What’s going on?”

Auntie Toru gasped a wail, and Auntie Mo reached for Raela’s hand again, drawing her down the path through the oak trees toward home. “There is so much you don’t know. So much we have failed to tell you. So many mistakes we have made. So many reasons you can never see that man again.”

Raela stopped in her tracks, ripping her hand from her auntie’s. “What did you say?”

Auntie Mo’s proud shoulders slumped, cowering and uncharacteristic. Her voice was low and sad. “You can never see him again. You are promised—betrothed to be married—to another man.”

Raela stumbled back and barely caught her hand against the rough bark. “I am promised? I have only just learned about marriage *this very moment*, and I have already been promised?”

Auntie Toru came up beside her and slipped her arm around Raela’s elbow, patting it softly. “It happened when you were born. A promise between your parents and his. A marriage of their children.”

Raela was panting, shaking her head against the impossibility of it all. Her heart had been so happy just moments before, and now she couldn’t keep her promise to Killian. She couldn’t be his mate. She couldn’t be with him. Her eyes misted over.

She couldn’t kiss him. She hadn’t even known how much she wanted it until now—until the very possibility was ripped away. Her eyes flashed to her aunties.

They had kept this from her.

“How could you not tell me?” She glanced to the sky, the blue barely visible between the leaves. “How could you keep this from me?”

A tear slipped down Auntie Mo’s rounded cheek. “We thought it would be better and safer. We thought the magic would keep you happier with us here until the time came to tell you everything. We were going to tell you tonight. After midnight. When you would finally be safe.”

Raela jolted. “Tonight? Why tonight?”

Auntie Toru picked at her fingertips. “Because you turn eighteen at midnight. The curse from a bad, bad f—woman will start to be broken. She wants to hurt you. That’s why we hid you. Your parents sent you to us to raise and protect you. Your curse will be broken when you turn eighteen and marry your future husband. Tomorrow. On your birthday.”

So that’s why they had started the birthday soup this morning instead of tomorrow like usual. If there had been any blood left in Raela’s face, it was gone now. Her mind was buzzing like bees over clover, a chaotic blend of information, shock, outrage ... and hurt.

Auntie Mo stepped before Raela, and Auntie Toru shuffled beside her. They brought their hands together above their foreheads and bowed forward, both leaning so far forward, they fell to their knees. “I’m so sorry.” Auntie Mo said, Auntie Toru repeating the words in whispers after her. “We wanted it to be a happy surprise. We wanted you to be excited.” They clung to the hem of her dress, enacting the ultimate apology. “We have made so many mistakes.”

Raela frowned in new understanding. “Is this why you both have been so tearful lately?”

Auntie Mo nodded. “We didn’t want to lose you to them. To the humans outside the forest. To those people. We’ve been selfish.”

Raela had to agree.

Their grief was clear, but Raela didn’t feel ready to forgive them. She patted their heads instead. The anger and ache fought for dominance in her chest. What would she tell Killian? How could she say the words? What would he do? What would she do?

“Your mother and father will be there,” Auntie Mo whispered.

The pain in her chest struck again. *Parents*. She had parents. Clearing her throat, she managed to ask, “Are they kind?”

“The very best,” Auntie Toru murmured, keeping her eyes on the ground.

Raela wasn’t convinced that kind people could abandon their child to the forest and neglect them until her aunts released her. But she still wanted to know them. Her soul was torn between her desire for Killian, and the desire to see her family. As if she had a choice. Her choices had never been her own.

Auntie Mo rose slowly, stiffly. “Let’s return to the house. Finish packing. Celebrate with your favorite birthday soup. Watch the moon until the midnight hour has passed. Then we will take you outside the forest. Any sooner and—”

Auntie Toru set her hand on Auntie Mo’s shoulder. “Take us home, Momo.”

Nodding numbly, Raela followed. Her eyes fixed on the grasses, on the dirt and mushrooms, on her shoes. Anywhere but her aunts. Her emotions were whirling, but she felt too stunned to cry. The world around her remained the same. Yet, for her, everything had changed. She was finally leaving the forest, but not the way she had planned. Not with Killian.

She had to tell him. She had to tell him soon, and then never see him again.

Raela couldn’t fathom the idea of him returning to their meadow to see his hope crushed later. Like any splinter it was best to fix it as quickly as possible. Mother Bear sauntered up beside her and placed her head under Raela’s hand.

I’m sorry, little one, she crooned into Raela’s mind. *We thought it was best. But you look...* She shook her head. *I’m so sorry. If I could do it again...*

Raela threaded her fingers through the bear’s fur, only slightly comforted. But she had no more words to offer just then. Her next words must be for Killian. Must be to break them apart and break her heart. Unless they could just run away forever.

Unless they could run. The idea blossomed in her mind.

As they arrived home, her aunts muttered about preparations as they bustled around, pulling out a lovely dress unlike anything she had ever seen before, and began lighting candles. But all the while, Raela was planning how she could sneak out

and find him. She needed to know what he thought they should do. She knew her duty to keep her aunties' promises, but what of her promise to Killian?

Killian

His lips were buzzing and his heart pounding in his chest as he floated through the gate on light steps. She would meet him again, and they would be together.

You are prancing. Jax grimaced as he paced beside Killian. *What are you, a puppy?*

Killian laughed. “Perhaps so. She is just amazing.”

Jax weaved his head side to side. *She is. But aren't you a bit ... reckless?*

“No. I have never wanted something or someone so much. And my wedding is set for tomorrow, so no time like the present.”

With a growling huff, Jax muttered. *Your father will never agree.*

But Killian was indifferent to his friend's negativity. Who was the wolf to understand matters of the human heart, anyway? His father would see his joy and acknowledge his true affection for Raela. The king, who had married the love of his life, would recognize the same love in Killian's own chest. He left Jax outside as he burst into his father's office.

“Father, I need to talk with you—” Killian stopped short. The king stood embracing King Jonat of Walworth, Queen Marisha at his side. Killian searched the room for the missing princess, but no one else was in the room.

The king's frown at the interruption changed as he waved Killian over. “Come, my son, they have arrived! Finally!” He turned back to the other king. “Jon, I'm so glad to have you here. The feast preparation is well on its way!”

The neighboring king was tall and thin with golden-blond hair, a skin tone as pale as snow, and blue eyes. The queen was also taller than average but had hair so blonde it was almost white and blue-green eyes. The neighboring king smiled widely at Killian. “Prince Killian! My, how you've grown. I'm sure your father is so proud of you and your many accomplishments.”

Killian swallowed hard, sending a swift glance to his father and back. So this is what it was like to be supported by a father figure. He shook off the thought. He needed to undo this whole betrothal, regardless of the king's kindness. “Thank you, sir. I hope your journey was easy. I am sorry, but I need ... I must discuss something with my father.”

“Of course,” the neighboring king said as he reached for his wife's hand.

“Of course *not*.” His father glowered at him. “Whatever you need to say can either wait or be said here.”

Killian's cheeks pricked either from flush or from pallor. His heart pounded out of his chest, and he took a firm stance, his hands clasped behind his back to hide their shaking. He cleared his throat. “It is uncomfortable to say, and I really would prefer to speak with you alone, Father.”

“Speak, Killian. Or leave.”

“First a question.” Killian looked around the room again, but indeed, there was no one else. “The princess?”

King Jonat just smiled, though his face was lined with worry. “Princess Raina will arrive late tonight.”

Closing his eyes, he clenched his jaw and spoke, holding an image of Raela in his mind for courage. His eyes flashed open. “I am sorry to both of you for coming this long way, but Your Highnesses, Father, I cannot marry the princess.”

“WHAT?” His father bellowed as the group all seemed to simultaneously take a step backward.

“I have found someone I love. And I am going to marry her,” Killian said.

Queen Marisha grasped her husband's arm, her rosebud lips open in shock. “How can this be? Our countries must unite. It's what your mother wanted. It's what she asked of me! I promised her, Prince Killian.” She fisted her hand, twisting onto her husband's sleeve, who stood frozen with a horrified frown.

“I am sorry,” Killian said with a bow. “Truly.”

The king—his father stalked toward him. “Nonsense, boy. Absolute nonsense. You will be here tomorrow for your wedding ceremony to the princess, or you will not inherit my kingdom! You will no longer be the heir!”

The words hit like a blow, but they didn’t land as hard as the king’s previous threats. Killian blinked several times before his mind cleared. “Well, maybe I don’t want to be king.”

“This isn’t about what you want! This is about the kingdom. This is about promises.”

“This is about love, Father. I love her. Just as you loved Moth—”

His father’s face was inches away, dripping sweat down his red cheeks. “You only love yourself, boy. You love your comfort and your ease. Once again, you are running away. You always run away from your responsibilities.”

“You should never make promises on behalf of another person!” Killian yelled back. “I was a toddler, and you gave away my whole future for your treaty.”

“Your future is to be king.”

“My future is with her. With Raela. And I will not go back on the promise I made to her.” Killian moved toward the door. “You don’t even think I’ll be a good king. Don’t pretend. You’re acting to manipulate me in exchange for an extension to your own reign.”

He placed his hand on the door handle before turning to bow low before the other sovereigns. “Again, I am sorry to you. I hope the princess is reunited with you shortly and that you all live happy lives.” He turned a hot glare to his father. “Goodbye.”

“Don’t you shut that—”

And Killian shut the door on his father. On his wrath. On his control.

Panting, he flew down the stone corridor, wondering how his escape from the castle could be so much longer than his way into the office in the first place.

His father was a fool. He was forcing a round peg into a square hole. And Killian was tired of the battery of tests that his father gave him, tired of constantly disappointing him, tired of failing despite his best efforts. He wanted to be a man that Raela could be proud of, regardless of his station. Of course he had wanted to be king—and he had prepared for that eventuality—but he wanted Raela more.

Turning the corner, he ran almost directly into Phineas who pulled short just in time. Phineas looked exhausted, like he had just arrived home.

The men regarded each other before Killian nodded. “You will be a better king. I am confident that my father will choose you, and you will do brilliantly,” he said before sweeping past him down the steps.

Phineas reared back and followed at his heels. “What are you talking about?”

“I fell in love with her, Phin. The woman in the forest. I informed my father just now, and I am no longer the heir. He has finally disowned me. But I’m sure he will choose another—you. You were right all along.” Killian half-smiled. “Apparently, I needed a chaperone.”

Phineas stopped and stood gaping at him. Killian paused and put his left hand on his friend’s right shoulder. “I’m sorry, Phin. I really am. I was an idiot and didn’t see your advice for the valuable help that it was. I should have never iced you out as I did. You’ve always been the best of friends and my brother. For everything I said and did, I was wrong. Please forgive me.”

Phineas reached his left hand forward and onto Killian’s right shoulder, the soldiers’ greeting, before nodding once.

Killian had more to say, but time was passing, and his father would soon send guards after him. He could almost hear his father’s bellowing from here. Before Phineas could speak, Killian turned and ran away toward the garden.

Phineas stood behind him, frozen in thought before Killian heard him trying to catch up. “Killian, just wait a second.”

He picked up the pace as he exited onto the lawn, focused solely on finding Raela. His gaze fixed beyond the trees and toward the gate. It didn't matter that he was early. He was no longer prince, and he was no longer interested in keeping her a secret. He'd go to her now, bring her out of the forest, and even if they lived as paupers, he would be happy if he was with her.

Something clung to his hand, pulling him to a sudden stop. He looked up with a start to see Lady Zalina holding him, her cheeks flushed with the exertion of catching up to him.

"Killian, my love. What are you doing?"

He pulled her hand away as he tried to extricate himself. "I'm leaving, Zalina. I'm not marrying the princess. The betrothal is off."

"Then, Killian, marry me! Choose me instead! You need a noble to lead with you! We could rule the nation together!" She flung herself against his chest, her hands wrapped tightly around his neck. "I love you. I always have. I want to be your bride." And with impossible strength, she wrenched his head down toward her and kissed him on the lips.

Killian pulled back, horrified. Bracing his hands on her waist, he pushed away. "No, Zalina. I don't love you."

But Lady Zalina was no longer looking at Killian. Her eyes flashed to the edge of the wood, and a dark shadow fell over her blue eyes, blackening them like ink in water. Her lips curled into a dangerous grin, one that he had seen Jax wear a hundred times before he pounced on his next meal.

"For eighteen years I have waited." She hissed in a dark whisper. "I have found you at last."

As Killian followed her gaze, his heart filled with ice. There, standing outside the gate staring at them, was a light-haired woman in a stunning, iridescent blue dress. He would recognize her anywhere. Raela.

The kiss. He realized the truth with a jolt of dread.

She must have seen the kiss.

Killian turned, ready to run to her, but Raela shook her head and backed away, then ran back through the gate. Zalina grasped his wrist, pinning him in place as a cold sensation wrapped around his arm. "Oh no, my little princeling. You are coming with me." Her face was marred with an inky stain that drifted from her eyes down to her cheeks. Her pupils blackened with centers that glowed red like coal. Zalina stomped onto the grass. Around her foot a circle of mushrooms burst from the ground, red on top, with white spots and billowing white eaves. Purple haze wafted around the stems.

"Killian!" Phineas roared behind him. "Let him go, Zalina! Jax!"

But it was too late, and they were too far away.

Reaching into her pocket, Zalina dropped three seeds into the center of the mushroom circle. They flared like a hot yellow fire, firing golden shoots upward like wheat before the whole bushel disappeared in a puff of purple smoke.

"The trap is set." Zalina said with a wide grin. Her ashen gaze drifted up and down the prince as he tried to twist his arm free from her impossible hold. He could fight off Phineas more easily than this—how could he not extricate himself from her? But try as he might, her grip held fast. She smiled at him. "If you won't choose me now, I'll take you by force. Give you time to rethink your terrible decision."

Her hand drifted over the mushroom circle and more purple smoke seeped from earth. This time, instead of pine, it smelled like dirt and ice. A billow of snow blew up in a swirl above the mushroom circle. "Watch your step," she cackled as she tugged him into the circle.

They fell through the fairy circle, a portal through a blizzard-filled tunnel, until all he saw was darkness.

CHAPTER 13

Darkness

Raela

She was a fool. Worse than a cub on a rotted branch dangling over the rapids of the river. She should have known better.

She had snuck past her aunties after they'd dressed her up in some long, flowing, who-knows-what-for gown and run to the forbidden gate, her heart simultaneously bursting and breaking in her rush to see his face one last time. To say goodbye. Or, if he'd only ask, to run away with him forever.

And he was *kissing someone else*.

Was this what men did? Did they have many mates? But no, he said ... well, he had said many things. What was she to believe? What did she really know about him in the end? All she knew for sure was that her heart felt like it was being stripped from her chest, scraped out like honey from the hive. Dripping. Hollow.

She'd thought she was so clever, too, with her studies and her magic. But one handsome man and one soul-binding promise was all it took to sweep her away like a seedling. Her aunties were right. She should have never talked with him. Never met him. Never grown attached to him. Now, like sap stuck to her hands, she must rip herself away from him.

Why was it so hard?

The trail before her was littered with the mushrooms she had neglected over these last few weeks—weeks she had spent distracted by him. She had maintained some of the mushrooms near the meadow and others along her path from the cottage to their meeting place. She had taught him what was safe and what was poison, but so much of her time had been spent with him, learning his language, enraptured with his company, that she had clearly missed many. What a dangerous distraction. She just hoped none had completed a full circle. Up ahead, the light on the path pulsed frantically, as if trying to get her attention.

She sidestepped it, feeling bitter. "You let him in. You brought him here."

The light flashed faster, then veered to the side, glittering off the low boughs of a tiny pine on the forest floor. The line of light led from her feet past the little tree. Pointing to something wrong. Frowning, Raela followed only to find a small, completed circle of mushrooms, only a few feet wide, with beautiful golden strands of wheat that filled the center in a small cluster. Purple haze drifted around the dried leaves and wrapped around each cluster of plump yellow seeds.

They were lovely. They glittered as if swaying in a wind she couldn't feel. Instinctively, she reached for them, yearning to touch the golden strands. Something warm and inviting drew her closer, almost calling to her from the happy, glowing plant. The mushrooms around the bounty were red with white spots, and the bottoms of their cute umbrellas were white and billowy. Her gaze slipped to the side following the purple smokey haze and fell on a pile of flowers on the ground beside it. Now dried and stiff and scattered on the ground. Killian's bouquet.

He had been courting her from the beginning.

If Killian had never come, she would have never neglected her work, these mushrooms would never have circled up, and this wheat would have never come. As beautiful as it was, it didn't belong in her forest.

"Killian," she seethed. "It's his fault. He brought this here." She kicked at a mushroom, which fell to the side, but the wheat didn't disappear. She kicked another and another, and then in a burst of anger, she grabbed the base of the wheat and ripped it out by its roots. The wind swept around her, responding to her passion, and the wheat whispered as each strand brushed past another in her grasp.

She should burn it. She would bring it back to toss it into the hearth.

With a final glance to be sure the circle was destroyed, she paced back to the path carrying the stalks of wheat in her hand. The heads of grain shimmered in the shadows of the pines. But the beam of light had returned and rushed before her, pulsing

bright and panicked. Her brows furrowed in confusion. She had broken the circle. She had pulled out the foreign plant. Why was the light still upset?

She glanced down again. They really were beautiful. She stroked the heads of wheat, feeling the seed kernels and tickled by the tiny stiff strands that peeked out in between them.

One pricked her finger.

And then, all at once, Raela collapsed to the ground into darkness.

Killian

Killian awoke on a lump of scratchy canvas. Straw stabbed through the fraying fabric, piercing through his clothing to prickle his skin. He blinked once and his whole soul clenched in pain as he remembered his last few moments of consciousness.

Raela saw him kissing Zalina.

Zalina was magical.

Killian was throneless.

The ceiling above him was covered with stones, mildew and moss lining each one. At his feet, water dripped slowly, splattering the ground with an echo. The room was cacophonous in its all-consuming silence. Killian sniffed and realized he was very cold.

“Ah, so the sleeping beauty awakes.”

Killian twisted his head to see Zalina standing behind rusty iron bars. Stairs led upward behind her. His eyes traced the three other barred walls before returning to her. He was imprisoned in a dank, iron cube. Zalina stood out from the drudgery, draped in a black and red velvet gown which billowed around her. The crown she wore was black and peaked at the sides. She looked every bit a queen.

“Hello, Killian. I really do have to thank you.” Zalina said. “I wondered why you went for your walks so early and so often. If you hadn’t found her, she would never have left that magical forest. Never landed in your cursed land where I could finally taste her magic. It’s no wonder I hadn’t, disguised as the forest’s magic. Those cursed fairies were quite clever.” Zalina’s laugh was slow and cruel. “I thought she’d just been suppressed, not living wild and free. But then she stepped out, looking for *you*. And she burst forth with that delicious wellspring of power. The irony of it all is quite lovely.”

“Zalina.” The words came out of his parched throat as a croak. He tried to swallow. “What do you want?”

Her arms folded across her chest. “I want the throne I am owed. My mother is Queen Marisha of Walworth. I should be the next queen. I should be the one named in the treaty.”

He paled. *Walworth*. The neighboring kingdom. The kingdom that would unite with Norwood through his betrothal. He forced out his next few words, terrified of the answer. “You’re the missing princess?”

Zalina burst into a bitter laugh. “No, no, you fool. Not that one, at least. I’m quite a bit older than eighteen, but thank you for that compliment. King Jonat was away fighting in some naval war, and just before the start of their very young, uncomfortably arranged marriage, my true father, a fairy, tricked her into having a dalliance with him. The next year, when my mother tried to hide me with her parents, my fairy father stole me away to these mountains, in this castle. I’ve been here practicing my magic, perfecting my skill”—she sniffed—“overcoming my father to steal his magic and more recently, waiting, waiting, waiting for my chance to take my rightful place as your bride. I am the firstborn, regardless of who my father was. The throne is mine. I have been here, hidden away, abandoned by my parents in shame, and I am owed my rightful place. And they thought some fairy-blessed betrothal would protect you both.”

“But I met you up north,” Killian said. “You’re the Rykers’ ward—”

“I am the ward of no one but myself. They were wealthy and weak, mere tools—unable to resist my magic. And they have served their purpose, just as you will serve yours. I may have cursed the tiny princess at the beginning of her tragically short life, but your assistance allowed me to complete my curse through the fairy circle.” Her lips pulled wide in a deadly smile. “They are such useful portals.”

Killian scrutinized her appearance—young by fairy magic, not her true age. And the princess—somewhere—was cursed? Because of him?

His voice wavered. “Then who is the princess I was betrothed to?”

“That maiden was struck down by my poison-laced wheat.” Ice flooded his veins as she spoke. “She will now sleep forevermore out of the way. Sleeping but not dead so I can use her magic to bless the land after I remove my drought. I’ll be a hero. I just need you to marry me, and we can rule our nations—united and powerful.”

“But how did the princess get her magic?”

Zalina’s dark eyebrows flew upward. “From fairies, of course. On her birthday, gifts of magic were bestowed on the child.” She huffed a breath through her nose. “Though no one foresaw the depth of ancient magic that was awakened within her from the giftings. She will bless the whole land, making it prosper.”

His cheek twitched in a wave of disgust. Only months earlier, he had considered Zalina lovely. But the dark bitterness in her eyes looked nothing like the innocent maiden she had appeared to be.

“Zalina, I won’t marry you.”

He expected outrage, but instead she smiled. “Not yet, perhaps. But if I can break even my father and make him give me his power, I can make you consent to marry me. Willingly. Maybe it will be a desperate, dying sort of willingness, but magic doesn’t care about duress.” Her hand twisted flippantly in the air. “And marry me you will, as it’s the only way to overcome the magic protecting your throne. And that throne is mine.”

Killian swallowed again, knives lining his throat.

She turned away and waved casually behind her. “Sleep and dream well, beautiful prince. We will have many, many long and painful moments together. It’s your choice how painful.” She glanced back with a slitted gaze. “And how long.”

CHAPTER 14

Sleep

The Castle

A bear found the sleeping princess first. She was barely breathing but warm and flushed. An ever-living, frozen rose. When two fairies arrived, led by a pulsing light, the princess was surrounded by forest animals. The fairies carried her to the castle, using their magic.

There, the princess was placed in the tallest tower, in a bed with silken sheets.

The kings and queen and all the people fell into deep mourning. The beloved princess had finally returned only to be trapped in endless sleep, with no hope of awakening. So painful was their grief, the rulers begged the fairies to let them sleep too.

Heads low, the fairies obliged, wishing they, too, could sleep to escape their grief. Sleep to numb the pain. Sleep to pretend it was all a bad dream. But they had already hidden away for too long, so they stayed awake and wept.

The whole city slept.

All but two.

A man and wolf who had escaped the sleeping magic by hiding in the Forbidden Forest now raced toward the storming Spires.

CHAPTER 15

Trapped

Killian

After Zalina left, Killian studied the room from his prickling bed. Breathing hissed from the steps, although he couldn't see the creature from his blackened, rusty cage. Each bar plunged into the stones above and below, and the cage's door swung on thick, solid hinges. The stone floor was covered with slick brown mildew that crept up the edges of the metal, growing thicker toward a pile of bones and refuse in one corner. A slight slit on the side wall might have allowed archers to defend the castle at one time, but now it provided Killian his only sense of passing time. The wind howled from outside the window. The room was lit by a crackling, flickering firelight from the torches that lined the stairs. Water dripped loudly on the stone from the ceiling above.

The stairway leading up was the only way out.

The room was darkening, and he began to shiver. Rising, he touched every bar, shaking them to see if there was any weakness. The door didn't budge no matter how much he pulled on it. He shuddered again from the cold and dropped to the ground to do pushups—anything to warm up his body. The floor smelled horrific: mildew, urine, food rot, and something metallic, so he didn't continue the movements for long. His breath quickened, but he stopped before breaking a sweat to prevent true cold.

Staring grimly at the pile of bones in the corner, he grimaced when he noticed the patches of fur that covered some. Many pieces were tiny, but other bones were larger than Killian's. He turned away to stop the dread of his own demise.

Killian switched to squats. Anything to keep his body warm and his mind from thinking. But his mind was restless, each memory more intense than the last. His father's horror at his decision. The hurt on the Walworth king and queen's faces. Phineas's confusion and desperation. His father's last words removing him as heir. Raela's look of betrayal.

He tried to think of L'Turetian words, murmuring them under his breath with each squat, but that only made him think about her.

Raela.

How she must hate him. How confused and hurt she must be by the kiss. He didn't have time to right it, to get her out of the forest, and to tell her he had chosen her over all else. And now Zalina had trapped him, so he couldn't tell her the truth. Couldn't tell her that he loved how her stunning smile lit up the world. That he wanted to reach for her touch like flowers reach toward the sun. How impressed he was with her cleverness and quick wit. How he loved watching her purse her lips together when she was thinking and memorizing. He loved her humor, her confusion over foreign concepts like courtship. He could hear her laugh echoing through the room. Killian grumbled before he collapsed on the prickly bedding. His head felt heavy. How many mistakes could one man make?

"What? Stopping already? That was the most entertaining thing I've witnessed in *years*."

Killian stood and whirled toward the cage beside him, where a mass of brown and matted blankets rose up and blinked at him. The voice was haggard and came from a wrinkled face caked with mud. Ten nubs stuck out from the base, which he assumed were feet but appeared as mildewed as the stones they rested on.

An arm, more like the leg of a gangly stork stuck out the side and waved him on. "I particularly appreciated the exercises. I try to do my own to maintain these muscles." She flexed the rail-thin appendage.

"Excuse me, who are you?" he interrupted.

"Some old forgotten thing. You may call me Meshougi."

"Meshougi? What does that mean?"

“The Crazy Lady.” From beneath her matted gray locks, she winked at him. “But you are quite muscular. We can’t have you losing those in the future, can we? Mm? Carry on. Don’t let me stop you. Here, together.” She grinned, displaying a wide, toothless, turtle-like maw as she started doing squats, her blankets sending puffs of dust around her with each descent.

“I—” He shook his head, trying to clear his head. “I’m Killian.”

She paused. “I know. And a prince.”

His brow furrowed. “Are you a seer?”

She tapped her fingers together with a mischievous glint to her eye before she giggled. *Giggled*. “She did say your name and standing, my dear.” She huffed a wheezing laugh ... or maybe a cough? “I am a pretty good guesser of the future, but I shan’t claim that one.”

He settled back onto his bed, shifting so his back was on the stone before realizing how much faster it pulled the heat from his body. Wrapping himself in the tattered, scratchy blanket, he looked over at her grinning form. “So you are also imprisoned?”

“I am currently here, yes.”

Killian nodded and looked to the ceiling, wondering what she had done. He searched for a clue as to what day or even what time it was. The slit in the wall had shifted from yellow to a dull, lime-green hue and was now darkening to a blue.

The old lady bounced on her bed, and pawed on it, like Jax circling his napping place. “Settle in, my dear,” Meshougi said as she snuggled back into her bedding, and the wafting odor of rot and sweat assaulted him. “The storm always gets worse before it gets better.”

Killian couldn’t repress the shudder that rolled down his spine.

“Rest.” She eyed him over the rolls of dirty blankets, her voice croaking like a rusty hinge. “Rest now, little prince. You are currently in the eye.”

Water dripped from the ceiling, loudly pattering out the seconds on the stone below. He had started to count them in an attempt to assess the time. But after he had lost count, yet again, the task only ratcheted his sense of hopelessness.

The light from the slit in the wall wavered from blue to green to yellow. His muscles ached from lying down, pacing, and the cold.

The firelight crackled and echoed up the stairs where something ... or some *things* breathed, every exhale rattling and wet.

He tried again and again to find a way out of the cage. But the metal was solid and the stone unyielding.

The rotting, meaty smell from the pile of bones burned his nose. He avoided looking at the stack, afraid he was looking at the previous occupant ... and his own future state.

Time passed painfully. Eventually, he fell asleep in a fitful rest. His dreams were torrid, violent, and terrifying. Once, he swore he felt icy fingers on his forehead and heard the crooning of his crazy cellmate. But it was only for a moment, and then he was thrown into nightmares again.

He awoke.

But the nightmare seemed to continue.

The window slit was dark olive green upon his awakening. The pattering of the water hitting the floor smacked dully. His senses thickened, probably because of his poor sleep.

A scraggly crow brought a sack of hard and moldy foods with a bladder of sour wine. The first time, he had sneered at the old lady as she scrambled to the ground and ate it all at once. He thought she should save some to consume throughout the day. But then the rats came and ate the food he had stored on his bed, leaving him with nothing. The next time a meal arrived, he found himself racing across the ground himself. Better to eat all the food at once than to lose any amount later.

It was never enough. Killian was hungry. He shivered from the ache in his belly and the ice that seeped into his marrow.

One day, a giant fox entered the dungeon. He walked on two legs, was clothed in leather, and was armed to the teeth. His chest plate was held up by leather straps. A single red stone decorated the center. Holding a crossbow, he tugged open the cage, shoved Killian out, and pushed him to the stairs. A hall opened partway up the stairway, and at the end, the fox tossed him into a massive room, as tall as the pines of the Forbidden Forest. On a platform twenty feet high, a chair overlooked the empty room—empty but for a stool that sat before a crank connected to a massive wheel that plunged deep below the stone floor. The huge fox shoved him onto the stool and prodded him to turn the crank. Each spin of the crank turned the wheel ... and did nothing else. No water was pumped. No flour was ground. Killian could see no reason for the wheel at all.

A chain fastened his ankle to the floor beside the stool.

Zalina walked across the platform above him, taking a seat in an elaborate chair. Her gaze was as piercing as a sword.

“Will you marry me?”

“No,” he said, his voice rough and sore.

She shifted her hand. “Then continue.”

The fox pointed to the crank with the sharp tip of the crossbow, and Killian turned it. He turned the wheel until his arms trembled. Every time he tried to stop, the fox prodded his back. So, he continued until his grip slipped off completely.

Then he was brought back to his cage.

After what felt like only a few hours, he would be brought back to repeat the work at the wheel. This continued for days or weeks or months. He couldn’t tell. His life was hunger, cold, and pointless work. Threads of hope thinned to whisps.

Time passed like this.

The drops of water made no noise.

The window’s light never wavered.

The fire burned silently.

Killian churned the wheel, spinning, pushing, pulling, endlessly, fruitlessly. He was thinning, but his muscles were forced to function until they broke. Sores lined his lips and hipbones and heels where they struck the hard stone beneath the sleeping sack. After one crank-turning session, he returned to the cage and heard the mass of blankets speak again.

“Why are you here, Prince?”

He blinked at her. She had remained silent for so long, he’d nearly forgotten about her. “I’m sorry?”

“Why are you here, Prince?”

He shook his head at her stupid question and cleared his throat from the foul, thick saliva that coated it. “Zalina brought me here.”

“She did.” Her round head bobbed in a yes. She leaned forward, pointing at him with her twiggy finger. “But why are you still here?”

He snarled, his belly, body, and soul too sore to tolerate inanities. “Why are *you* here, Meshougi? What did you do?”

Her eyes widened. He frowned. They widened even more and sparkled with *glee*.

She really was crazy.

She lifted a single finger and patted her nose on the side before she settled back onto the bed.

Killian no longer looked for a window to tell him the time of day. It was all meaningless. He no longer watched the drips of water. He no longer heard their pattering. There was no escape. There was only dimness. And an odd neighbor.

The pile of blankets shifted, and white eyes peeked from their depths. Meshougi spoke again. “Prince, what do you fear?”

He sat up, delicately setting his back against the wall and glancing at her through their shared wall. Before he restarted his count of the 1,433 stones of his ceiling, he answered, “Nothing.”

“Why?”

He shrugged a bony shoulder. “I feel nothing. Why would I feel fear?”

The mass of blankets shifted. She leaned toward him. He couldn’t even smell her anymore. “Did you feel nothing your whole life?”

“Well, no.” He scratched at his oily head, his fingers tangling in their mats.

“Then what *did* you fear?”

Killian struggled to think back. To remember through the fog of his mind. “I feared losing a fight.”

“So do mice. What else?”

He frowned. “I feared being a poor king.”

Her hand flitted before her, a twig on a bush, waving in a gust. “Nah. What else?”

“I ... what is the purpose of this?” Killian sat up, a spark of anger flared like a dying ember, dull but present in his chest.

“These are comfortable fears, Killian. You are not ready yet.”

Killian scoffed and spat on the ground before he rolled away from her and covered his head.

Flies buzzed around the wounds on his feet.

“Leave those.” Meshougi said as he went to brush off the maggots. “Leave them. They save lives. They may not be pretty, but they clean wounds. They have a purpose. You have to deal with the toxic rot before you can heal, Prince.”

Killian stopped brushing at his legs. What did it matter anyway? His calves were thin, mere bones attached to his paddle of a wounded foot. His feet had become as mildewed as hers.

He was cold, hungry, aching—this was his whole identity. The wheel was his whole world. He was taken there again.

Like she did every time, Zalina asked, “Prince Killian, will you marry me?” But today she said added, “I will spare you the wheel, and we shall feast.”

His eyebrow twitched, but he said nothing. His stomach growled loudly, and she smiled. He felt nothing.

He started from the memory as if it was real. He could still feel the warmth in his hands as he had held hers. He could smell her sunny meadow scent. The glint from her hair still flashed and waved in the wind. As radiant as the sun that heated his skin, Raela had warmed his heart. His heart stumbled at the renewed sense of loss.

Killian sat up and held his head in his hands. Hot tears burned at the corners of his eyes. One slipped down his cheek.

The woman stood right behind him, holding onto the bars. “Who was she?”

He sighed. “She was special. I was going to marry her.”

The mass of blankets pressed toward him, her voice quiet and without the usual amusement. “What was she like?”

He swept together all the memories of her. “She had a voice that called the animals ... literally.” He chuckled. “I thought her bear was going to eat me. But it turned out I should have been scared of the magic light instead.” He scratched his bearded face. When had he grown a beard? He continued. “She was the sun itself—warmth, happiness. She radiated life. And this sounds crazy, but the trees bent to her as she passed. The wind picked up and swirled when she laughed. She felt real.” He chuckled bitterly. “I felt real, like I finally mattered to someone, like I could do something right for once in my life. She was my princess. The one I chose. Or would have.” He sighed as he rubbed his eyes. “You probably think I’m crazy.”

She smiled in that old turtle way. “As an expert on crazy, yes, I do. But not for this. Not for her.”

His cheeks cracked into a real smile.

Meshougi leaned forward further. “So what did you fear?”

His smile faltered into a sad sort of grimace. Naked and exposed, he ventured the truth. “I feared becoming nothing and no one. Being unimportant. Forgotten. I hated disappointing my father, but at least ... at least he still saw me. Even if it was, I don’t know, even if it was in a bad light.”

She pointed a bony finger toward him. “And what have you become now?”

His chest seized. “Nothing and no one.”

“Is that really true?”

He stared back at her black eyes. “Isn’t it?”

Her wiry brow rose, and she settled back, staring at him with her unflinching gaze.

Killian looked away, uncomfortable.

Isn’t it?

CHAPTER 16

Awakened Heart

Killian

Nothing and no one.
Nothing and no one.

Crownless, hopeless, trapped. Of course he was no one. But that woman's questions itched like a burr under his stockings. Is it true? Was he no one? Did he still matter if he was crownless, weak, and wounded?

This time, Zalina brought hot food onto the platform. Sweet and savory smells wafted down as he turned the wheel. His mouth watered, and he watched every movement as she ate. She offered him a drink of her steaming mug of mead. He struggled to remember why he should continue to say no.

But he did. Every time, he refused the food, refused the marriage proposal, and kept at his fruitless work. His hands were blistered, and he struggled to push the wheel. Zalina growled in frustration.

He was thrown to the floor of his cell. Killian lay there, staring, as unblinking as a dead person.

"Why are you here?" Meshougi asked again.

The coal of anger flared hot in his chest, and he pulled himself up to a kneeling position, wincing and shaking. "I'm here because Zalina brought me here."

"And why are you here *now*?"

Killian knew she was crazy, but this was too much. He turned to her, glowering. "We are jailed. Trapped. I'm frozen and weakened. At this point, I should just marry her, and then maybe I could warm up for two minutes."

"Are you trapped?"

Killian rose with a growl and stalked the seven steps to the cell door. "Look, lady, this is locked." But as Killian grabbed the door to shake it, it swung open easily, catching on the stones below and slowing before it clattered into the other barred wall.

His mouth dropped.

"This door has been unlocked since the moment you woke up here. So, I ask again. Killian, why are you here?"

He gaped. The door was open. "I ... I don't know."

"Who has trapped you here?"

"Zalina."

Her wrinkles folded as she raised her brow. "Has she?"

Hadn't she?

The old lady stood on bony feet and tottered toward him. "Listen," she hissed as she grasped the bars and stuck her head through. "Listen, Killian." And then she fell silent.

He frowned at her, waiting for whatever she was going to say next. But she stared, blinking slowly at him. He was about to huff off in frustration when he froze ... and listened to ...

Silence.

He turned to watch the water drip from the ceiling. He watched it hit the ground, splattering in tiny droplets. But there was no sound. He glanced at Meshougi who tapped her long fingernail on the bar, but there was no click or clang. Wind wafted down from the stairwell opening. He could feel it on his cheeks, but it had no whistle, nor did it cause the torches on the wall to waver, or the tattered banner to move, or the smell of rot to assault him.

He shook his head, disturbed by the twisting discordant feelings that something was terribly wrong. The sounds and feelings didn't match what he saw. What he saw didn't match what he sensed.

Meshougi was grinning wildly. “Ah. The prince now sees! One last time. Killian, who has trapped you here?”

Hesitantly, Killian tried a new answer. “Me?”

“Hah!” The lady clapped and spun in a dusty whirl. “Yes, my boy. Yes. You must wake up. You must save your princess. You must escape this castle.”

Killian’s heart sank, seized by a deep, aching terror. It was his fault yet again.

“Why are you assigning fault, young prince?” Meshougi shook her head. “There is no one to blame, and there is no value in assigning blame. See truth. Move forward. Take responsibility for the present. Rivers can’t run backward.”

He leaned his head against the bars. “What if I can’t do it? What if I can’t escape?” He inhaled slowly, the words of his father echoing in his mind. “My father said I always quit ... and I do. What if I fail to save her?” He swallowed, his words catching on the painful lump that had formed in his throat. “What if she doesn’t want me and I can’t win her back? What if I can’t convince her of the truth?”

She frowned in confusion. “You continue by fighting even when it’s hard. You take difficult steps toward the next right thing even when your legs are shaking. You push through the fear, because you know what is right ... because you know who you are.”

Meshougi smiled sadly. “Of course this is hard. Of course you’re going to fail. You’re going to get knocked down, pushed back, and fall again many times. But if you stay down, *you stay down*.” She leaned toward him again. “So you have to get up. Failure isn’t falling. Falling is a lesson. Failure is merely a teacher that helps you to do things differently next time. Mistakes are lessons, and life must move forward, or you will always be trapped. Either here in this trap that Zalina has set for you or in your own mind, crippled only by yourself.”

“I killed my mother. I failed my father and my nation. I continue to lose to Phin—”

“Your mother made her choice out of love to save you. It was her love that has sealed your throne from Zalina’s reaches.”

He turned wide eyes toward Meshougi. “How do you know about my mother?”

Meshougi’s eyes welled with tears before she cast her gaze to the ground. “I arrived a moment too late. The magician from Walworth underestimated Zalina’s cursed knife. I couldn’t save her in time.”

“Zalina ... *Zalina’s* knife?”

“Her first attempts to take your throne were by breaking the betrothal and ending your life. It was a set up.”

Killian’s heart stuttered.

“Zalina cursed the princess at the beginning of her life—the day you met her. Zalina also scorched the earth this summer, hoping to make you desperate enough to marry her for her magic.” Meshougi shook her head. “But these things, while important, are not why we are trapped here. We are trapped here because you have been given a choice. You can continue to wallow here in failure and solitude. You’ll have no more responsibility and never can hurt anyone again while in this cage ... that is, as long as you don’t marry Zalina. Or you can fight your way out of here, reclaim your kingdom, repent, and do all you can to restore your relationships. Ultimately, it’s up to you. You have to choose to continue to fight, Killian. No one else can save you but you.”

A spark ignited within him. His hands grasped at the bars as they faced each other, her scraggly head rising only to his chest. She smiled at him. With a nod, he made his choice. “I will try. And I won’t give up.”

“Trying is enough. If you’re ready, then wake up!” The old woman stood on tiptoes and reached a finger up to Killian’s forehead. “Wake up!”

His world tilted and warped unsteadily. Something within him fought against her, dark arms of the nightmare curse yanked on him, begging him to return. The entrapment had been miserable, but he knew what to expect and had somehow become

comfortable in his discomfort—comfortable in filth, the lack of expectations, and misery.

Was this his future? To be comfortable in his own waste? His own weakness?

No.

He surged forward, like a man under water, shoved upward toward the air and toward the light.

His eyes popped open, and he flew off the straw bed. His chest heaved with massive breaths, and his skin prickled with sweat. The cell was the same, but his senses were flooded with new information. The water plopped as it splattered on the stone, followed by a faint echo. The wind made the flames along the stairs flicker with crackling and popping. The scent of bones, his bed, and his own skin were repugnant and overwhelming. He set his feet down on the ground and realized he had no sores. His calves were muscular, not skeletal. His palms hadn't blistered. Reaching for his face, he felt some stubble, but no beard. Time had restarted in earnest. He'd lived a lifetime in his nightmare.

Meshougi giggled behind him, and he turned to find her crouched by the head of his bed, her index finger still pointed toward his pillow, where his head must have rested. "Good morning, dearest prince. Are you ready?"

"Ready for what?"

"The fight of your life."

Killian blinked, still reeling from everything he had experienced. "All of that was ... it was a dream?"

"A suspended magicked state, yes. Zalina wanted you to submit to her without you wasting away into something ugly. She is vain and wanted your handsomeness for herself." She shrugged. "All fairies know sleeping spells ..."

"But it felt real. I felt pain. I—"

"Feelings are master liars when wounds are deep."

Killian could only nod, too overwhelmed by the impossibility of what had just happened. He rubbed his face and stretched out his hands. "So shall we fight?"

Her toothless grin smothered her twinkling eyes. She stood and moved to the front of the cage. "Better get to it. Start failing. Fall down a few times. Just get back up."

"You sound like Phin."

"He sounds very wise." She smiled. "But seriously, you'd better start. You broke the spell. She's noticed you're awake, and they're coming. You are out of the eye, my prince. The storm is about to get a little gusty."

Killian heard raised voices and a clatter of metal upstairs. "How am I supposed to fight without a sword?"

She shrugged. "Step one, my dear prince, is to open the door. Fighting is a problem for future Killian."

Killian whirled to the door and jangled the lock that was actually locked in the real world. He searched the room, then dashed to the bone pile in the corner. He brushed aside the rotting fur, selecting a few likely contenders. He ran back to the door, his fingers slipping several times as he picked the lock. But with a glorious clank, the bolt shifted, and the door creaked open.

Stomping footsteps approached. He turned to help Meshougi escape from the adjacent cage, but she stood outside her door, her hands clasped before her.

"You got yourself free?"

She winked. "I was never locked in. I've been waiting for you. After the loss of your mother, I followed Zalina, waiting for your arrival—waiting to help. Crazy ladies are no threat to mastermind mistresses. I've been here for a very long time." Her eyes brimmed with tears as a sudden wave of emotion flooded through them. "But now, let's go."

With a squawk and a screech, ten humanoid animals, corrupted and upright but smaller than the overly large fox, poured down the stairwell. Killian searched the room and grabbed a large femur bone. Dashing to the other side of the stair, he ripped

off the tattered banner which unseated the metal rod at the top. Wielding the bone in his left hand and the rod in his right, he faced the horde of creatures who crouched in readiness.

“I believe in you, Killian.” Meshougi's voice whispered in his ear, though she was several feet away. “Fight now. Fight for truth. Return with honor.”

He nodded. The truth. The truth would be his sword through the lies, and through his enemies. His time was now.

With that thought, he sprinted forward and whipped his metal rod across the nearest raised sword.

CHAPTER 17

Escape

Killian

The ricochet of the heavy rod vibrated through his bones as he swiped and shoved his way up the stairs, which curved to the right, giving the others every advantage, as Killian swung the bone with his left hand. Countless racoons, badgers, and bobcats, most rising only as high as his knees, screeched and scrambled over others to run back up the stairs. Killian lit the banner on a torch, and one animal's shirt ignited as it raced past, catching several others aflame. Smoke and screeching echoed cacophonously, bringing several creatures to the ground as they covered their ears and noses from the assault.

Killian pressed forward, pausing when he heard harsh breathing above him. A strange creature glared, its eyes glittering red like rubies against the flickering flames, and it held a short sword in its elongated arms. It hissed, and a hundred thin teeth glinted. He had only seen pictures of this creature before—in the children's book. The poem and stories were true.

A goblin.

Fear threatened to paralyze him, but Killian shot forward. His mind whirled with the implications. First, magic was real, the ancients were real, and now goblins. Everything he'd discounted as children's tales had stood before him in mockery of his ignorance. Killian would be ignorant no longer.

The goblin rushed down the stairs, jumping onto Killian's shoulder, trying to unbalance him as it lunged with its sword. Killian spun and kicked the monster down the steps, landing on a few cursed animals who had struggled back to their feet and were returning to the fight. Meshougi had picked up a bone of her own and bopped the goblin on its head.

The prophecies, the histories—they were all true.

As Killian looked down at the unconscious goblin, he reached down and exchanged his bone for the creature's sword. He considered the animals around him and moved to end them. A wrinkled hand stayed his arm. "Only the goblins you must kill. Perhaps we can save some of the others from Zalina's curses before this is over."

Relief flooded through him, and he nodded.

A growl triggered another onslaught of creatures from above.

Ripping down another tapestry, he threw the attached rod like a spear and covered several with the flapping fabric. Using their distraction, he surged forward and knocked back several other creatures. Meshougi followed behind him, bopping a few more monsters on the head. She was singing. He swore it sounded like L'Turetian.

The fighting seemed endless, and Killian's arms fatigued. But he had just spent months—even if those months were a dream—doing painful, useless, endless tasks. Before, he was certain he would have quit as the fight seemed hopeless. But thanks to Zalina, he was now mentally trained for this. The thought buoyed him, and he laughed at the irony.

Killian was relentless.

The coyote he was fighting stumbled at his cackle and tripped up the stairs. Killian hit him with the back of the sword on his temple, sending him to sleep.

At the top of the steps, a fox stood. He was similar to the one in his dreams who brought him to push the wheel. A gem glowed in his chest plate, and he wielded a battle ax, which he heaved toward Killian. The prince ducked in the nick of time and lunged his shoulder forward into the creature's stomach. They both landed heavily on the stone. The monster kicked at him. Killian rolled and grabbed a small table, heaving it toward the fox. It exploded into shards of splinters that littered the floor. Eyes glinting red, and moving faster than Killian could react, the fox grasped Killian's collar and hauled him to the edge of the parapet. Killian's back slammed into the stone, before the fox's inhuman strength heaved him over the edge.

His legs wheeled in open air as he clung to the fuzzy arms of the fox. The fox's claws ripped through his clothing. They were atop the castle battlement, on the steep cliffside of a rocky mountain face. Snow covered every surface, and an arctic wind ripped through his clothes. The cliff was dizzying in its height, and fear seized him even as he maintained his grip on the creature. This was the end. The fox held him over the precipice, and all the encouragement Meshougi had offered would be for naught. There was no coming back from this fall.

Get back up.

The monster's eyes flared red again, pulsing brightly as the red gem on his chest gleamed. In a moment of impulse, Killian released a hand. He grabbed the dagger from the sheath at the creature's side, flipping it out of the fox's hold. He barely caught it as it whirled in the air, the blade nicking his palm. But he twisted and thrust it into the gem in the fox's chest plate.

The monster screamed and stumbled backward, dropping Killian as he tripped on his own feet. As Killian fell, he stabbed the dagger between the stones. The weight of his body slammed against the outer wall of the castle, but the dagger held. He pulled himself up, his head barely able to rise over the battlement edge. The fox lay on his back writhing as red smoke poured out from the gem. Shadowy goblin-like forms with gaping eyes and silently screaming colossal mouths appeared like ghosts, then disappeared into dust.

Killian slipped down the wall as his knife shifted. Sweat slicked his palm, and his grip faltered. His toes couldn't find purchase on the stone.

Get up.

It was too hard. His muscles quaked and shuddered.

Get up.

His fingers loosened, and he hung on by his fingertips. His life depending on a single pad and a tiny dagger.

Get up!

He roared as he whipped his hand up and grasped the edge of the stone tightly. Slowly, painfully, he pulled his body upward. His fingers bent, their tips slipping into the cracks between stones. Killian groaned as he pulled his body higher and harder. He let go of the knife in a moment of desperation and leapt upward, scrambling until—finally—he caught a handhold. Using the strength he didn't know he still had, he heaved himself on top of the parapet and rolled over it, landing hard on the stone floor.

He'd done it.

Sweaty, he panted and grinned as he lay on his back staring at the cloudy sky. The familiar putrid smell accosted him first, and then a wrinkly face popped into view directly above him and upside down.

Meshougi smiled at him and patted his cheeks. "Well done."

His chest flooded with warmth at her words, as a clatter of footsteps and shouting drew his attention. He rose to his feet, ready for the next onslaught, but the commotion was growing louder on the other side of the battlement. Before him, the large fox spasmed and awoke. Its eyes had turned to gray.

Meshougi bent at the waist, her fingertips peaked and pressed against her forehead. She bowed just like Raela had to Jax. She murmured, "Ancient fox, welcome back."

The fox strained to rise from the ground and blinked. His gaze took in the group before him. *How long have I been cursed?* he asked before stretching first backward then forward on the stones. *Too long. Too long.* He growled. *I will destroy her and save the rest of my kin.*

The fox bowed his head, then turned to face the other woodland animals. Killian noticed bracers, necklaces, bracelets, and belts on every one of them, each with a glowing stone. Each stone bore the same manipulative, possessive curse.

A goblin leapt at his left, and Killian dodged just in time. He sliced at it with his sword, but a purple light glowed, and the wound healed instantly. Meshougi battered its bracelet on its wrist and shattered the stone. The goblin blinked, then disappeared in a cloud of smoke.

“Some evil stays evil,” she said with a shrug. “The goblins were cast with blood magic and made with pain and suffering. Not even that can be redeemed in the end. Hit the stones.”

He nodded, uncomfortable with the presence of evil. He must eradicate it from his land. And as he regarded the animals and ancients, whose eyes pulsed with the same light from the gem, his heart billowed with determination. “We must save the rest.” They were his responsibility now.

The other side of the central scout tower rang out in a surge of clashing sword strikes. Killian and Meshougi ran around the corner and joined the chaos. Most of the creatures faced away, toward a large gate. The fox rushed past and bit down, crushing every glowing gem he could see on the nearby creatures. Several crossbows fired randomly as the goblin holding each one poofed into smoke. Some animals fell back on all fours, shaking their great furry heads. Many of those fighting were not ancient, and ran off, underfoot, to escape.

Killian dove into the fray, piercing the stones and freeing the violent creatures around him, dispatching the goblins that turned his way. Finally, he reached the center of the mayhem where a man and a growling wolf fought side by side, guarding each other’s flanks.

“Phineas!” Killian cried. “Jax!” He rushed to Phineas’s back and patted his shoulder as he moved to stand behind him. “Don’t kill the animals. Crush the gems to free them. They’re possessed by dark magic.”

Jax grimaced. *That would explain the blank gazes, the ancients betraying their duty to protect, and their fearlessness.*

“Glad you’re not dead,” Phineas called back.

“Me too.” Killian chuckled. “How did you find me?”

“A couple of crazy ladies in the woods,” Phineas yelled as he ducked an arrow. “Let’s get out of here.”

As Killian nodded, the creatures converged on the four of them, and the fight continued.

CHAPTER 18

Hiding

Killian

The men and the wolf struggled during the onslaught. Unlike the training fields where each opponent was human, they had to continually adjust their swings to strike knee-high raccoons, human-sized goblins, and chest-tall coyotes all without delivering fatal blows. The precision needed to strike the gems and restore the creatures cost them time and garnered more shallow wounds on their arms and legs, but they persevered. Moving steadily toward the front of the castle, they threw themselves down the stairs to the massive portcullis at the entrance. Meshougi followed behind them, singing gently, as she danced her way through the fallen, confused, or unconscious creatures. She touched the recovering animals and whispered words to revive them before catching up with the trio.

“Past the gate, my dears. This magic cannot cross it,” Meshougi called.

Killian grabbed Phineas’s sleeve and ran toward the twenty-foot iron gate that opened on the enormous stone wall. Spikes tipped each metal bracer at the bottom, looking lethal and ominous as they approached. At the top of the column of stairs beside the gate, a goblin’s sinister smile gleamed before he axed through the lever, releasing the giant chain. The heavy metal gate began to collapse. In a moment of adrenaline, Killian threw his sword. He heard a gentle croaking murmur from Meshougi. The sword glowed and moved slightly to the right, striking true. It held fast in the stone between the chain links. The gate seized and stopped.

Killian glanced at Meshougi who shrugged casually. “It was a nice throw. But even heroes can benefit from a little magical support.”

Phineas yelled as several creatures knocked into him, pushing him over the threshold and through the gate. Instantly, the creatures spasmed and transformed into a mishmash of ancient animals and very confused woodland creatures who quickly shrugged out of their humanesque clothing to disappear into the forest.

Behind the gate, the rest of the horde stood growling and snapping at the humans until those freed by that fox pounced on the other creature’s gems and freed them too. Killian hesitated. He knew what it was to be trapped, and he ached to free them all.

A bony hand settled icily on his forearm. “Even princes need to know when to delegate.”

He snorted. “The ancients have it in hand?”

Her hand spasmed as a mischievous glitter flashed in her eye. “Well ... in paw. Zalina approaches. You must head into the forest.” She reached up to grasp Phineas’s forearm. “Come, dear, now is the time to run.”

Killian met Phineas’s amused gaze as the caked ball of blankets with spindly legs led them down the rocky path. Snow scattered around them, pushed by the wind against the crags and cliffs to either side. The snarled trees grew closer and closer until the cloudy sky was obscured and the path was enveloped in shadow. They had sprinted for some time when a piercing scream reverberated through the forest.

Meshougi stopped and looked back. “She is close.”

Jax sniffed. *Get off the path.*

“No! Don’t!” she cried, but it was too late, the two men and the wolf had already stepped into the shadows. She huffed and went with them. “This is dangerous.”

It is better than being found on the pathway. She comes.

“For someone ancient, you are not wise.”

For someone wise, you are acting foolish. You’ll get them killed.

“Jax,” Killian said in warning. “Be kind.”

Get down! The ancient wolf ducked under an overhang in the escarpment, burrowing into the cliff face. The others followed. Above them, a creature with beating wings flapped by once, twice and again, its flight stirring the trees with a whistling wind.

I think she can smell you, old woman. Jax's green eyes flashed as his nose tucked into Killian's shoulder. He pulled back with a snort. *You're not much better, Killian.*

Killian agreed, but nothing could change that now. He gave the wolf a quelling glare.

It's true though ... Jax muttered. *No respect for canine sensibilities ...*

The tree closest to them suddenly creaked as it wavered, shifting side to side in an abnormal pattern like something had landed on the highest boughs.

Then a whisper shivered through the forest. "Killian ... Killian."

He shuddered, his center filled with ice as the eerie yet altered voice of Zalina rippled through him.

He felt a kick to his shoulder, and he looked back at Meshougi who put her finger to her lips, before pointing to her forehead. He tried to focus on Raela so he wouldn't accidentally respond to the call of Zalina's magic. He remembered Raela's bubbling smile. Her patience with his pronunciation. Her sweet vigor for life.

A woosh of air filtered through the branches, until the tree wavered and returned upright. Zalina called again, "You cannot save her. I will marry you, and you will be mine. I *will* be queen."

The heavy presence was lifted as the beating wings faded into the distance.

"Well, that was terrifying," Phineas said.

Killian had to agree. "Zalina has cursed the true princess. I have to make this right. Then, find Raela and clear this whole thing up."

"Can I ask—and I don't mean to be callous—but why doesn't Zalina just kill the princess or you?" Phineas sheathed his sword.

Meshougi sat up and brushed off her filthy dress and the blanket tied like a cloak around her neck. "She cannot. The magic of the blessings prevents it."

Killian turned to her. "The blessings?"

Jax huffed. *Magic complicates everything.*

"I promise I'll tell you when we get out of here," she said to Killian. To the wolf, she added, "So bitter in your old age."

Jax's fur bristled. Killian reached for him. "Jax, don't eat the nice lady."

I wouldn't eat that if she asked me.

"I bet I'm delicious," she said as she eyed her forearm. "Maybe a little crunchy right now. But wine tastes better with age, so why wouldn't I?"

Jax rolled his eyes, then headed back toward the path. The others followed behind, watching the shifting shadows of the forest which swayed and groaned in acrid wind. A low hum emanated from the ground and blackened bark and droned around them.

Jax was leading them back toward the place they had stepped off the path, but then he slowed and began rapidly sniffing the ground and air around him. *The path is gone. My nose says we were here, but there is no path.*

Phineas and Killian searched as well, but every turn revealed the same pattern of trees, rocks, moss, and ice. They found no tracks, no path, and no evidence that animals ever trailed through this part of the forest. Since they were several hundred feet lower in elevation, snow patches were rarer. But it was as if their path had never existed. The light around them dimmed as the trees closed in tighter. The hum of the forest was increasing by degrees.

“I did tell you to stay on the path.” Meshougi shrugged. She sat heavily on a rock, strumming her fingers along the green and black lichen.

Jax whirled toward her, but Killian set a hand on his shoulder. “Peace, Jax.” He turned toward Meshougi. “Do you know the way out?”

Closing her eyes, she stood slowly, her knees creaking like trees in the wind as she turned first one way, then another. Jax snorted in impatience. She opened her eyes and turned up the hill. “It’s this way.”

“Up?” Killian raised a brow and turned to Jax, but the wolf shrugged.

It doesn’t smell like death that way.

“Isn’t that the way we came?” Phineas asked as he unsheathed his sword. “Weren’t we running downhill to get here?”

“Magic has twisted the forest. Don’t believe what you see. Follow your heart.” She turned toward Jax. “And his nose.”

Now she speaks with great wisdom. He came up beside the old woman with a nudge of his giant head. She scratched behind his ears, and Jax gave a quick wag of his tail before sliding away from her touch. Together they took off uphill.

Slipping on the rocks, the granite stone started to chip and shift, like shale or powdery limestone just as the lichen lost its rough edge and began to shimmer—slick and slippery like algae. The ground sloped treacherously downward. They moved through the trees in a diamond shape, Meshougi at the back and Jax leading with his nose as they weaved through the forest. The hum of the trees was low and loud enough that Killian’s chest hummed with the vibration. It began to pulse. Then it pulsed twice. Like a heartbeat. Slow and monstrous.

The trees were now so close together that the men had to turn sideways. Jax brushed against each one with his broad shoulders as he slipped around them. The tree bark had shifted from the piney clumps of Raela’s forest to something more like papery skeletons. Branches now grew like angled arms, thick and bent. Each black spot of the birch began to ooze, and the tarry substance clung to their clothing. Slow rivulets dripped from the base of the trees and coated the shale path.

Killian stumbled and caught himself on one of the blackened trees. Pain jolted up his arm. A whisper spoke in his mind, “*Coward. Murderer.*” He ripped his hand away from the slime and bark, and the pain and voices halted. Killian looked back at Meshougi, eyes wide and questioning.

Meshougi watched him with an owlish gaze before heaving out a huge breath. “And so it begins.”

CHAPTER 19

Shadows

Killian

“Jax,” Killian said, “is there another way? Can we go back?” Killian cringed at the words that so closely mimicked the tree’s accusations. He was a coward.

The wolf sniffed the air. *This way does not smell like death. Something rotten is coming behind us, though. Something like moldy carrion.*

Meshougi’s hand settled on Killian’s forearm, her beady gaze holding his as she gave him a smile filled with compassion. Killian swallowed a sudden rush of emotion, feeling the warmth from her comfort and nausea from his shame. She squeezed his arm. “The only way is through, dear. One step, and then the next. One breath, and then the next. Sometimes, all we can do in times of difficulty is hold to the truth. Your dreams taught you that what you feel, see, and hear may not be real. The trees tell you the lies you once believed.” Her smile turned a bit sad. “The storm is picking up now, but you have already conquered one challenge—you have overcome. The winds blow, but you must not bend to breaking ...” She released him and stepped forward, placing her bony hand on the bark with a wince to help herself down a rocky step. “And don’t listen to the trees.”

Phineas and Killian made eye contact. Phineas was waiting for his lead, his face lined with determination, confidence, and trust—trust Killian didn’t feel he deserved. But he would do his best. Killian swallowed hard before nodding to his companion. Sheathing his sword to better maneuver through the trees, Phineas took the lead, and Jax followed close behind him. Jax’s pelt grew thicker with slime with every brush against the leaves. Phineas’s bulk struggled around each slobbery, twisted branch and crooked trunk. Killian kept his sword drawn and moved sideways, constantly keeping watch over all his companions.

Meshougi began to sing in low and haunting Common, harmonizing with the eerie rumbling murmur of the forest.

"The whisper tides will seek a sigh
Some breath to steal and shriek the lie.
But rightly fight among the fray,
The might of light will guide your way.

"The trees drip words, the words burn hot,
But truth will sear the pain to naught.
So seek your path, and do not stray,
Be strong of heart, come what may."

“Maybe you could sing something else,” Killian muttered, as fear dripped like ice down his spine. He hesitated. The way forward required him to touch the bark again. Closing his eyes, he inhaled slowly. *The only way is through.*

His shoulder brushed a leaf. “*Unloved,*” it hissed. “*Unworthy.*” He tripped, and his knee landed hard on a root. “*Alone. Hated.*” He pulled himself up by a branch. “*Hiding behind a crown you don’t deserve.*” “*Nothing without it.*” “*Only good for a betrothal.*” “*Murderer.*” The trees were so dense that every step and twist put him in contact with another piece, and every piece added to the cacophony of voices.

Mushrooms scattered along edges of the tree roots, some red and white, others black as coal. They emitted the smell of rotting onion, and thick oil beaded along the edges and hissed when it hit their clothes and skin.

The voices grew louder as his vision blurred. “*You killed your mother.*” “*You were never good enough to be king.*” “*It should have been you who died.*” A flash of the crown and his father’s frown surged through his mind. “*He was never going*

to choose you. It was always going to be Phineasssss.” He saw his father pat Phineas on the shoulder with a proud smile that Killian had never seen.

Killian shook his head, muttering under his breath, “Don’t listen to the trees. Don’t listen to the trees.”

Ahead, he could barely make out Phineas, his every movement shaky and stilted. Killian used the inside of his shirt to wipe his eyes, trying to see more clearly. He thought he saw Phineas’s cheeks shining with tears. Jax stumbled and whined. He looked at Meshougi who moved forward with her eyes closed and her head tilted upward. She was singing something too low to hear, but with every touch of the trees, her wrinkly forehead spasmed for a moment before it settled again.

The only way is through.

A thousand types of mushrooms now filled the space, covering the ground, trees, and branches. Wide yellow ones climbed the trees, and purple feathery mushrooms dripped like poisonous stalactites from the boughs above their heads. His vision swirled. Then the forest disappeared behind a darkly-colored hallucination.

Buxom women filled his view, their dresses low, and their eyes hungry. Some held chalices that spilled blood red wine, others with decadent sweets. His father stood with his arms wide and a beaming grin that crinkled at his eyes. “My son, take one or take them all. Who needs a contract? In fact, let’s burn it.” He took off his crown. “This is yours. Rest here on your throne.”

His vision shifted to a battle between him and Phineas. He had finally overcome his friend and held the sword to his neck. Phineas lay on the ground staring up at him, his eyes filled with black ink that bled onto his face. His voice was garbled. “Kill me, traitor. End this competition. I do not wish to live under your kingship.” Killian saw himself draw his sword up and then plunge it into Phineas’s chest. Phineas cackled as bloody spittle landed on his lips. “You actually did it, you murderer. Finally. You killed me.” His gaze fixed on Killian’s. “You killed me. Now he will love you and only you.”

Killian screamed as he fell to his knees, trying to push out the images. The women in the vision crowded back in, petting his hair, crooning, and giggling. His father stood before him, shoving the crown toward his head. “Take it, take it, take it. It’s all you ever wanted. It’s all you need. Take it. Take it. It’s finally yours. Everything you ever wanted is yours.”

Killian felt his hands on his head as he closed his eyes. But the vision was in his mind, and he couldn’t close his eyes to that.

A rotting smell of old meat flooded his senses.

He rubbed his fingertips together, to gain some sense of reality. His vision self had stopped moving. He knew that the stench came from somewhere behind him. Though his vision self was still standing, he also knew he was kneeling, though he could not see it. The smell grew stronger. *The only way out is through. Bend, don’t break. Get up.*

“Jax! Phin! Meshougi!” he called aloud, and though he felt the vibration in his throat, his ears couldn’t hear it. The only sounds were the tittering women and his father’s, “Take it, take it.” He stumbled to his feet in the real world, the pressure on his toes the only truth he knew. Pressure on his hand told him he held onto a branch. Meshougi’s song echoed through his mind. *Some breath to steal and shriek the lie.* They were the lie. He had to trust his sense of touch. Trust the truth.

He stepped forward and hit something. His body stumbled a step before he caught his balance. The women around him grew talons, and their mouths opened to cavernous pits. He stepped again, taking a deep breath. Then another. The women morphed, their extremities extending, and their elbows and knees sharpening. His father’s face lengthened as his eyes blackened to empty space and his mouth dripped vomit as black as the mushrooms. Everyone began to scream. Meshougi’s song now came from his lips, “But rightly fight among the fray, the might of light will guide your way.”

One step. One breath. One step. One breath. “The trees drip words, the words burn hot, but truth will sear the pain to naught.”

Sear. Light. Truth.

Light?

The women's faces transformed again, this time to sharpened beaks. They began to peck at him. Sharp pinches grasped and tore at his skin in the real world as well. But this wasn't right. He didn't want the treaty broken for just any woman. He didn't want the crown at the loss of his father. He didn't want to forsake his responsibility to his people. He didn't want to lose Phineas for the sake of winning. He wanted to be himself. He wanted truth. He wanted what was best for the kingdom. He wanted the mantle of kingship so he could serve, so he could help his people. He wanted to do what was right.

If only the light of the forest was here.

One step forward. One breath. He fought forward with a grunt and cried, "Light! Light the way! Help me see!"

With a boom, white light burst down and blinded him. The light was hot, and the air filled with acrid smoke. He peeked beneath his hand. The world around him was brilliant, bleached, and ... chaos. Massive crows with red eyes swirled around him, those who flew into the brightness screeched and flapped away, their feathers sizzling and falling like ash. His skin steamed as the poisonous ooze from the mushrooms and sap burned away.

He searched for his friends. Meshougi was crouched near his feet, curled in a ball, panting but alive. Jax cowered outside the light, beset by crows. Killian grasped his fur and tugged him into the burning white circle of light, leaving his avian attackers behind screaming at the edge of the shadows.

Where was Phineas?

Squinting, he saw Phineas several paces up the hill on his belly with his hands covering his head, overcome by the feathery attacks. Behind him, something massive approached. The smell grew as it drew nearer. Killian sprinted toward Phineas, relieved that a beam of light remained around his other companions as he dashed toward his fallen friend. The shadows behind Phineas formed into a two-legged beast, like a man but coated in black oil and mud that dripped around him with each squelching step. The creature reached for Phineas's foot, and Killian shouted.

Leaping on his friend, the light split to come with him, and burned at the crows which hopped and whirled out of the circle with piercing cries. Phineas was shaking. The beast had pulled his hand back from the edge of the light. And from his crouch, it glared at Killian.

"This one is mine," it said. "You left it behind."

"You cannot have him. He is my friend. My brother." Killian's flat hand cut through the air. "You cannot take him."

A gaping, unhinged jaw shuddered, and the voice of a hundred spoke. "I must have payment. You have entered my woods, and I must be paid. The rest can go free. Otherwise, I will kill you all. One to save the others. A true king would do it. It's a small payment. Only one life."

Killian's heart iced over. Phineas shifted beneath him, rolling to his side while he held his stomach. He looked so tired, and his voice quaked. "Killian, let him take me. You must go and save your kingdom. Be the king I know you can be."

One life for many. His friend for his own. Killian had run or hidden from many things, but in this, there was only one choice.

"No," Killian said without looking down at Phineas. "I will not let you take him." Before Phineas could protest, Killian reached out his hand. "Take me instead."

"Killian! The kingdom needs you!" Phineas cried.

Killian shook his head. "The kingdom needs a king who will do the right thing. Who puts others above himself. Who values his friends." He extended his hand farther toward the beast. "Who chooses love."

The shadow's maw pulled to the side in a dripping smile, and sharp yellow teeth glistened as it hissed. "Mine." Snatching Killian's hand, it yanked Killian from Phineas's side. The moment the monster touched him, he was filled with a sickening dread. He was going to die.

The light above Phineas merged with the light encircling Jax and Meshougi who rushed to Phineas's side.

The monster looked him up and down. “You will be payment.” His grip tightened on Killian’s forearm, piercing his skin.

“Let them go.”

“As you say.” With a wave of his shadowed hand, echoes of movement came from behind him: the crows scattered, and the trees shifted away. The path formed beneath them, leading down and out of the forest. The creature sniffed at Killian’s palm, licking it with a snake-like forked tongue. It sneered. “You’re weak.”

Killian swallowed. “Yes.”

“You have failed.”

Killian’s breath faltered, and he lowered his gaze to the bottom of the thing’s jaw. “I have.”

“Are you enough?” it sneered, its lip curling in a swirl of purple smoke. Killian knew that the monster meant enough payment, but the question triggered the memory of Phineas’s words and begged a deeper answer, a truer response. Despite every failing and stumbling, was he enough? Could he be enough just as he was?

Killian saw himself reflected in the monster, but felt within himself the lessons, the character and the man he was and wanted to be. He wasn’t perfect. He wasn’t flawless. But Killian could finally see himself as he was. Not per his father, or his court. But as a man.

Squaring up his feet, and with one last glance toward his companions, Killian met the monster’s harsh gaze. “I am.” He took a deep breath. “I am the son of my father, a prince who would do anything for my friends and for my kingdom. I am learning, and I am imperfect, but I will not give up.” He thought of Raela and how he had loved her. Something cracked within his chest. He stood taller. “I am enough.”

The monster cackled in mockery, but his laughter faltered and caught, shifting to halting, painful breaths. It looked to their grasped hands. “What are you doing?” It tried to pull away, but its grip was seized tight in Killian’s who couldn’t release him. Between their palms and around their fingers, tiny beams of light pierced outward until Killian’s entire hand glowed bright white. The light traced up to his chest before surging through his entire body.

“What have you done?” the monster shrieked. “Stop! I shall release you all! Let go!”

But Killian could not. He would not. It was time to end the monster. He gripped harder.

Inside the arm of the monster, cracks of light fractured the shadows, moving slowly before settling in its chest—a heart of light. The light split through the monster, who hardened and cracked like dry earth, the slits of light beaming out from within.

Meshougi stepped beside Killian and set her hand on his arm, glaring hard at the monster. “Light will always overcome darkness. Truth will always overcome lies. Love will always win.” She looked toward Killian’s face with beaming affection. “Finish it. I am proud of you.”

With a surge from his chest, warmth flooded outward, down his arm and into the beast. The light intensified, until all at once, with a screech, the light and darkness exploded.

Though the darkness hit the circle of light that surrounded Killian and his companions like rain on glass, it couldn’t penetrate it. The darkness dissipated into dust. The breeze swept through, the clouds parted, and the trees dispersed. The gentle green forest around them was filled with the smell of sunny meadows and sounded like songbirds at dawn.

Killian could finally see clearly.

CHAPTER 20

Revelations

Killian

Killian collapsed on the grass next to Phineas who had rolled onto his back. Jax landed with a thump as motes of dust whooshed up into the filtered sunlight. The horrors had gone, but each one of them struggled to grasp this reality after experiencing the lies of the nightmare. Killian threaded his fingers through the grass, marveling at the power of magic—they were no longer on the Spires. He recognized these trees. They were back in the Forbidden Forest. The snow, the sickly mushrooms, and the smell of rot had all vanished. Beside him, the beam of light pulsed a merry tune, hopping between each member of the collapsed crew like a puppy looking for pats.

The old woman sat gingerly, her swirl of blankets about her and her face in her hands. “Well, that was rougher than it appeared it would be.” She rubbed her eyes. “Turns out, knowing ahead of time isn’t always helpful for relieving the pain of the experience. And even knowing that didn’t aid as much as I might have wished.”

You couldn’t have warned us? Jax asked with a raised brow.

“No. I could not. To manipulate the future outcome—that would have changed the inherent magic of what Killian did.”

Killian frowned. “And what exactly did I do?”

“You saw and spoke the truth about yourself. You loved your friend more than you loved yourself. You saw yourself as you are and accepted the true version of yourself. You called the light to unveil the darkness, the lies, and the evil.” Her face pulled into its toothless turtle smile. “You did so much, it’s a shame that the whole curse doesn’t end right here.” She chuckled and then lay back with a whoosh in a deep sigh of contentment. “Seeing myself in this meadow, however ... This is much better in person.” Her tiny arms and legs stuck out of her brown garment like sticks in a ball of mud, and Killian held back his relieved laughter.

Phineas rolled to his knees and straightened up. His shoulders shuddered, like he was shaking off the last of the visions. He looked hard at Killian before he whacked his shoulder with the back of his hand. “You self-sacrificing idiot.”

Killian shoved his shoulder back, halfheartedly. “You would have done it for me.”

Phineas nodded. “I tried to do it for you.”

Phineas smiled, but Killian’s heart beat with a pang. “I couldn’t let you. You’ve been the best friend I could have ever asked for. You’ve loved me by speaking truth my whole life. I was stupid then.” Killian shook his head. “But going to the beast was the least stupid thing I’ve ever done.”

Jax rolled over and plopped his head in Killian’s lap. *I am glad you’re not dead. Again.*

Killian laughed and tugged his fingers through Jax’s thick black fur. “As am I, my friend.” Killian’s smile faltered when he looked over at Meshougi. Her whole countenance was frozen, and tears welled in her dark eyes. Across the clearing, two women, one short and round and the other slightly taller and waifish, stared at Meshougi with gaping mouths. They clung to each other with clasped hands.

Meshougi rose to her feet and took a step forward toward the duo.

The shorter of the two women, reached a shaky hand forward. “Shourentameta’il?”

Meshougi nodded, and the waifish lady burst into tears. Meshougi opened her arms. Then all three women ran to each other and collapsed in a heap on the ground. Embracing and weeping, they spoke L’Turetian so quickly that despite all Raela’s lessons, Killian couldn’t make out half of it. The tallest woman just kept crying, “Shou, Shou, Shou!”

The short, round woman pulled back and looked at Meshougi—or Shourentameta’il—as she held her face in her hands. Love radiated from all of the women. After a moment, Shourentameta’il pulled back, clasping the others’ hands, and tilted her head

toward Killian and his friends. Speaking in Common, she asked, “Have you met the prince?”

The shorter lady leaned over, her lip curled in disgust. She murmured in L’Turetian slow enough that Killian caught it. “Sadly, yes. Our Raelametanashi, he has turned her head. He’s poisoned her heart.”

Shourentameta’il laughed. “Oh, Motukalatabeli, since when is love poison? You forgot yourself all these years!” she said in Common. “The prince loves her in return, you know.”

A slow realization dawned within Killian as he remembered Raela talking about her aunties. Auntie Mo, Auntie Toru and ... Auntie *Shou*. Auntie Mo turned toward Killian with a high arched brow and stumbled through Common. “Do he? Do he know the curse has fallen? She sleeps?”

“Raela sleeps?” Killian said as he moved closer, his brows furrowed thoughtfully. “But the princess ...”

“The dark fairy fly to the castle in moments past.” The tall, waifish woman interrupted, biting her finger in between her teeth. “We must go fast. Whole castle sleeps now.”

Auntie Shou frowned. “Toru, Momo, did you forget to practice Common?” Her sisters ducked their heads. Auntie Shou leaned toward them. “Then who taught Raelametanashi to speak it?”

The waifish one, Auntie Toru, scratched her neck and replied in L’Turetian. “Her magic is honed, and she speaks L’Turetian very nicely, Shou.”

“You didn’t continue to teach her after I left?” Auntie Shou dropped their hands in her surprise. “How did you think that would go when she went to court? When she became *queen*?” The Auntie Mo’s cheeks flushed bright crimson as she crossed her arms. Auntie Toru hid her face in her hands. Auntie Shou just shook her head and laughed. “Oh, my sisters. *That* I didn’t foretell. Ah well. Thankfully, the prince now knows some of our language, thanks to our Raelametanashi.”

Phineas and Jax came up beside the trio, and Auntie Shou made rapid introductions. The aunties bowed to Jax deeply before Auntie Shou called their attention. “We need to hurry home, rest and ready ourselves, and save our girl.”

Killian agreed, but he was still confused. “But the princess. Zalina said the princess was cursed. The princess slept. Are you saying ...”

Auntie Shou reached back and tugged on his sleeve, clasping it with both her hands. “Come, my dear. I will tell you everything as we walk to the cabin.”

Auntie Toru beamed and bounced on her heels until she rushed forward and clasped Killian’s other arm. “Come, come. Hungry? I feed you.”

But as they turned to leave, Auntie Mo planted her feet and stayed rooted in place like the tree beside her. Her face flickered with waves of emotion. “Shou, we made cake every fourth season. On the day you left us. Why did you go? Why did it take you so long to return?”

Auntie Shou smiled sadly. “I’ve been waiting for the prince. Waiting for this day. It was the only way to save us all. The visions were clear. After Zalina stole her father’s magic—and after she killed the queen—I had no time to lose if I wanted to melt into the chaos of the magical shift and become nothing and no one to her.”

Auntie Mo’s eyes glazed over with tears. “You didn’t say goodbye.”

“I’m sorry, Momo, Toru. I loved you, and I hurt for you every moment and with every breath, but it was the only way to protect you, to help him, and to save Raela,” Auntie Shou whispered, her voice wavering. “The visions said as much. Telling you would have altered the future and prevented this very reunion. But I also knew I would come back. And Killian has made it so.”

“We felt you enter the forest,” Auntie Mo said.

“With a great darkness,” Auntie Toru added. “Where did that go?”

“What happened?” Auntie Mo asked.

Auntie Shou held up a hand. “All in good time, my sisters. But first we must tell the prince about his princess.” With this, Auntie Mo nodded sharply, stepped forward, and grabbed Phineas’s forearm. Auntie Toru held tightly to Killian.

As they walked through the forest, Auntie Shou began, her hand through Jax’s fur. “Phineas had asked why Zalina didn’t kill the princess or you. Do you remember?”

He canted his head. “Something about blessings.”

“Indeed,” she tightened her grip. “You were there, actually. On the day of the curse and the day of the blessing. All the fairies had gathered at the moment of Raela’s birth in Walworth. Toru blessed her with beauty, and Mo blessed her with magic. Then Zalina, came in her father’s stead to represent the fairies of the Spires. The magic of the land transfers through the father, or through marriage, as you know. So being jealous of her mother’s love and bitter that she was not acknowledged as a daughter of the queen, Zalina cursed the princess. Before her eighteenth birthday, the princess would prick her finger on a shaft of wheat and die.

“We were horrified.” The three fairies shuddered simultaneously. Auntie Shou continued. “Once a gift or curse is given, it couldn’t be undone. But it could be altered. Only the last fairy could shift the curse, so instead of dying, I blessed the princess, saying she would only sleep until it was broken by true love’s kiss.”

“Ever the romantic, Shou,” Auntie Mo murmured.

“Kisses are excellent magic. But of course, the true love is the important bit. That’s what breaks the curse. Breaks Princess Raela out of her sleep.” Auntie Shou paused, biting her lower lip before speaking again, more quietly this time. “You were there with your father and mother, Killian. And your parents and hers, wanting to ensure the magic of true love’s kiss, instantly betrothed you to be wed on her eighteenth birthday. Raela was the baby. Raela is your princess.”

Killian reeled and searched his memories, trying to put the baby and the woman together in his mind, but he had only been three years old. “I remember the castle and that the baby looked funny. The queen was crying, and I was mad at my mother for grabbing my shoulder hard as she pulled me from the room. For some reason, my memory also includes bears. Huge ones. I swear they were decorating.” He chuckled.

That was probably me. Lumbering out of the forest, the giant mother bear appeared, her twins stumbling behind her. *I am the ancient that chose to stay with Walworth. Just as Jax’s family chose to stay with Norwood, and the elk with the fairies.*

Jax eyed the ancient bear, before pulling back a paw, and bowing good naturedly. *Greetings to the ancient bear.*

She snuffed at him. *And to you.*

Phineas cleared his throat. “So, if I have this straight, Zalina is an evil fairy. She was unable to claim the throne because she wasn’t the king’s child, so she cursed Raela. But you altered the curse, and then what? You hid her for all these years?”

“All these years.” Auntie Toru repeated. “All these years, keep safe. Keep quiet. We could not have Zalina find her before time. We take back only at eighteen.”

“The plan,” Auntie Shou said, “was to return her after midnight, after the reach of the curse had ended.” She sighed heavily. “But as is the way of curses, they ... find a way.”

“So in my running away to be with Raela, I was actually just spending time with my betrothed, the lost princess?” Killian asked as he threaded his fingers through his hair. “Could that be true?”

“And *this* is the way of love.” Auntie Shou grinned. “Love finds a way.”

“It was the light. It called him and let him in.” Auntie Mo muttered. She glared back at the light, which danced behind them, landing leaf to leaf, thrumming happily.

Auntie Shou giggled. “Don’t be upset with the light, Momo. Killian is a good man.”

Auntie Mo sniffed and eyed him up and down. “He must be good. Only big good deserves our Raelametanashi.”

Auntie Shou looked him over, too, with a wide grin. “He is the best.”

Killian felt his cheeks flush.

Auntie Toru leaned behind him and whispered to Auntie Shou in L’Turetian, “He is beautiful too.”

Auntie Mo stopped and stared at her sister. “Toru!”

“It is truth! I know these things!” Auntie Toru continued in L’Turetian.

“Emaname u’ra.” Killian smiled and said *thank you* in L’Turetian.

Auntie Toru turned as red as a tomato and froze, pulling the trio to a stop. “I forgot he spoke.”

Even Auntie Mo joined the ensuing laughter.

CHAPTER 21

Rest

Killian

Killian's legs trembled with fatigue as the cabin finally came into view. Square and cozy, it sat nestled among aspens, a vibrant herb and vegetable garden at the back. Its thatched roof billowed over white walls and branch-lined window panes. String for laundry wove around the side like a spiderweb.

Killian's chest ached as he pictured Raela growing up here. A toddler running among the tall grasses, a girl tripping through the doorways, a young woman hanging the sheets. He could imagine her vibrant radiance filling the whole area. It was missing now.

Auntie Shou paused beside him. "It hasn't changed a petal." Auntie Mo wrapped her arms around her shoulders, and Auntie Shou sighed. "It's so good to be home."

Once inside, Auntie Shou, Auntie Mo, and Auntie Toru fell into rapid-fire chatter as Phineas and Killian sat around the small table. Killian had to duck a little, but Phineas was bent in half to fit his body under the shortened roof. Soon, Auntie Mo shoved Auntie Shou over to a seat and set a steaming mug of tea before her, despite her protests that she could help prepare the drinks. Auntie Mo quickly distributed the other mugs.

While Phineas struggled to manage his long appendages in the small chair, Jax and Klatma—the ancient mother bear—waited outside, the cubs taking turns batting at Jax's tail. Killian memorized every arch, every bookshelf, and every slat of wood of the stairs on the far side of the living room.

His body quaked in fatigue, but his knee bounced in anxiety. He needed to go save Raela—his princess. But Auntie Shou set her hands on his leg, reminding him he needed to refuel. Auntie Mo dropped a bowl of the most mouthwatering sweet rolls before him. Drizzled with fresh honey and topped with a lemon lavender jam, the bread heated through to his marrow. The stew was next, and Killian almost forgot how cold he'd been in the dungeon.

The murmurs from the women had settled some as Auntie Mo and Auntie Toru pulled up chairs to sit next to their sister. Killian felt a weight settle on his chest, and the group quieted.

Auntie Mo's eyebrows pinched together as she wagged a piece of bread toward Auntie Shou. "Don't tell me you're leaving again."

Auntie Shou's face crinkled without fully smiling as she sipped her third mug of tea slowly. "Raela must awaken."
Auntie Toru whimpered.

"Of course she must," Auntie Mo said, "but you can't go out there again, not just yet. You are all bones, and you stink. And what are you wearing?"

She speaks the truth. Jax contributed through the open window. Killian cast him a glare. *It was a tough competition between her and the Shadowbeast. Rotting, moldy ...*

"Then I will bathe first, if only to spare our more sensitive guests." Auntie Shou winked at Jax, who bristled.

"I'm coming with you when you leave." Auntie Toru pouted and folded her arms much like Auntie Mo. "You cannot run around the castle alone. I'm coming."

Auntie Shou closed her eyes. "If you must."

"I'm coming too!" Auntie Mo leaned forward. "I won't lose you again. And you will not leave again in such a way."

Auntie Shou reached for her sister, clasping her hand. "I am sorry."

Auntie Mo rubbed her eyes vigorously. "And I forgive you." Glancing at the men, she nodded toward the couches. "Rest. You must be at your best to save our Raela. No reason to rush to death so tired."

Killian stood, fatigue causing his muscles to shake, but all he could think about was Raela. Zalina couldn't kill her, but ... would she hurt her? And what about the others in the castle? What about his father? If the fairies had put them to sleep, too, they were sitting ducks under Zalina. Not really a threat, but so easy to dispatch. His knee started to bounce again. He needed to return. To save them all. To apologize to his father ... to ...

Auntie Shou came to stand beside him, taking his arm and pushing him back into a chair. "Rest, Killian. I will wake you soon, and we will go together. But you, even more than the others, need a moment to recoup. From what the future shows me, I see that Zalina will not hurt the others. Not yet. Not until you are there and can be threatened."

Killian scoffed as he sat in the chair. "Not very reassuring, Shou." Worries flooded his mind. He wouldn't sleep. This was a waste of time.

And then his head lulled back with a thunk.

"Princeling," a voice called, echoing and distant. "Princeling, it's time to wake."

Killian leaned forward on the chair, his mind suddenly whirling with thoughts of Raela and Zalina and the nightmarish battle of the slick forest. Auntie Shou stood beside him with a glass of water. "The time is now," she murmured as she patted his shoulder. Moving toward the others, she woke them as well. She was no longer wearing her muddy blanket but looked nearly human in her dress, apron, and shoes.

Killian rubbed his eyes and straightened in his seat. Scratching his chest, he gasped as he faced off with a scowling Auntie Mo. She poked his chest. "Do you love our Raelametanashi?"

He raised a brow, but this answer was easy. "Yes."

"Will you fight for her with your breath?"

"With your *life*, Mo," Auntie Shou corrected from across the room.

"Will you fight for her with your life?" Auntie Mo repeated.

"Yes."

"Will you be kind to her mistakes? Risk ... Shourentameta'il, what is *corrent*?"

"Embarrassment."

Auntie Mo turned back to him. "Will you risk embarrassment for her?"

Killian pondered her words for only a moment. He loved Raela, he would do anything, even protect her from embarrassment or shame, even if protecting her caused others to judge him. "I will."

Auntie Mo slowly eyed him up and down. Then she reached up. Tugging on his shirt, she pulled him low enough that she could pat his cheek. "Good. You may seek her hand."

Killian fought off a wry smile. "Thank you, Auntie."

Her eyes widened at the name, but then she smiled too. "You're welcome, my prince."

Phineas and Killian stepped outside, strapping on some old swords and daggers that Auntie Mo had dragged out from a hidden cellar. The leather cracked and groaned, but Killian hoped it would hold. No matter what, Killian would reach Raela this afternoon. He tracked the sun, thankful that Auntie Shou kept her word and only let him sleep for a few hours. Evening would soon arrive, and he wanted to end this before the sun went down.

"Princeling." Auntie Shou held out one last sword. "This sword calls to the light. I think you should take it. As a way to fight off the darkness. It was created by the fairies and used in the original battle. Your grandfather wielded it once."

Killian nodded gratefully as he strapped it to his side. His grandfather's sword. Pride at the legacy and humility at the honor flooded him. His finger followed the edges of the emerald gems that lined the hilt, and the gold filagree edged the fleur-de-lis pommel. Now it was his in another war against the goblins, and the evil they protected.

The fairies came out of their home, their gowns tucked into leather pants and frilled sleeves billowing from their bracers. He worried for them, but they were magical and knew the risks. Based on the glint of ferocity in their eyes, he wouldn't be able to persuade them otherwise.

Jax shook his shoulders and looked at Killian. They all followed suit, waiting for his cue.

Killian turned and faced his companions. "Thank you for coming with me. We will rescue Raela, no matter what Zalina throws at us." He looked at Auntie Shou. "And we will go one step and one breath at a time when we need to. And fight to the end." Auntie Mo patted Auntie Shou's back. Auntie Toru bared her teeth in a way that should have looked more menacing, but with her petite frame, missing teeth, and hundreds of wrinkles, the effect was more comical than frightening. With a gentle smile, he continued. "We will save Raela, my father, and our kingdom from the darkness. I will fight for you, I will protect you, and I will defend you to the end."

"And we'll defend you," Phineas said.

"And we'll defend you," the fairies repeated.

As I always have, I always will. Jax growled.

Killian nodded and turned, the fatigue burning away under the adrenaline of this moment. He was ready. His focus was singular. Killian led the others back toward the gate, heading north to his castle. North toward Raela. His steps were sure, certain. Only when they reached the meadow did he pause. The sun shone, and the wind slipped through the grasses. But it wasn't the same. The colors were muted, the senses flattened.

The others stopped beside him, and he turned slightly toward Auntie Shou. "It doesn't seem as bright without her."

Jax snorted. *Oh, dear braces of rabbits, you are so in love.*

Killian pinned him with a look. "Tell me it's not as full of life."

Jax rolled his eyes and sniffed the air. *Perhaps there is a change of scent. And perhaps a decrease in the magic.*

"Raelametanashi is brimming with magic. She is connected to the life magic of our realm. But now, she is sleeping, so the forest sleeps too. Zalina will be disappointed Raela isn't at her full potential." Auntie Shou cupped her ear. "Even the birds rest now. But when you wake her, the forest will wake." She turned and stared at Killian intensely. "And when you love her, your kingdom will bloom."

Phineas slapped Killian on the back. "Good luck. Better not make her mad or the kingdom will catch on fire."

Killian started to laugh until he saw Auntie Shou tilt her head back and forth as if considering the possibility.

Swallowing hard, he led them through the grasses, the brush line, and the pine trees. As they approached the gate, Killian halted. It looked as it had before, except, perhaps, the shadows were darker. He glanced behind him, and the beam of light pulsed as it struck the earth through the trees, burning through the boughs above.

The group—and the whole earth—seemed to hold their collective breath. He met their gazes, and each nodded with grim determination. Auntie Mo looked furious and lifted two fists as if she would pummel her enemies to a pulp. The mousy Auntie Toru also looked ready to battle, though more like an angry cactus or a bristling willow tree. Auntie Shou had a face of confident serenity and held a blue flame in the palm of her hand.

Killian hoped fleetingly that he could simply open the gate and they could waltz up to the castle in twenty minutes, unhindered. But as the light spread to make an arc behind them, covering hedge to hedge in a protective barrier, he prepared for battle. Zalina would never make it so easy.

Jax growled. Phineas shifted his gait and pulsed his grip on the pommel. Killian reached for the gate, unclicked the lock, and swung it inward. The meadow was shockingly dark, without any light from the afternoon sun like in the forest. It was also blocked by something within that writhed like a coil of snakes. As the gate swung back and clattered against the trees, the coiling halted. Silence reigned.

Then a wall of sound, hissing and screeching and thunderous, preceded a thousand cords of twisting thorns that launched through the gate and began their assault.

CHAPTER 22

Thorns

Killian

Thick vines covered in needle-like thorns whipped around their group. All that held them back from the rest of the forest was the arc of light that burned any vines that moved too close. A swampy stench accompanied the vines as they ripped through the clothes Killian and his companions weren't able to keep out of the vines' reach. There was hardly enough room to swing their swords. With a yell, Auntie Shou threw a ball of blue flames that sizzled along the writhing arms and opened a cavern within the thorns on the other side. Phineas and Killian dove through, back-to-back, swinging and twisting and taking hard-earned steps deeper into the writhing thorny mass.

The swords cut cleanly, but there were always twenty new vines to replace each one they cut down. Jax was ripping off vines and throwing them to the ground beside him. Auntie Mo had whipped out a glowing rolling pin, lined with electric green flashes of light that burned through the vines, while Auntie Toru held a tight whip of pink-hued water, with which she sliced through whatever came toward her.

Every inch they gained and every foot they moved forward was a struggle. They had so far to go.

We need a new plan, Jax said as he pawed at his jowls, a thorn sticking into his muzzle. *These thorns are turning my mouth numb.*

Killian frowned as he looked toward his forearm, which was dripping with blood he couldn't feel. The numbness quickly became a burning sensation, and his skin took on a sickly purple hue along the edges. "They're poisoned!" He shouted over the din of the screeching plants. "How do you get so close to the castle without being seen, Jax?"

The tunnel system, but that's too far to the west from here.

"There's a tunnel system?" Killian shook his head. "Never mind. Next plan."

Auntie Shou threw three more balls of fire. "Call the light!"

Killian raised his sword to the sky, terror slowly creeping through his heart. "Light!" The vines continued their assault as Phineas guarded him, but nothing else happened. Killian frowned and tried again. "Light!" Nothing.

Whirling around, he saw the light behind him, blocking the gate, its beams holding back a full assault on the entryway. The attacking thorns seemed relentless against the wall of light that protected the whole forest. "I think it's a little busy."

Killian sliced his way back into the fray, when his shoe brushed against something soggy. He glanced down to a red mushroom with white spots. "Shou, can you use the fairy circles?"

"Ha!" She paced toward him, a flame engulfing her hand. "Does a fairy use fairy circles? Of course. What living circles do you have near the castle?"

Killian swung overhead, then ducked beneath another whipping arm. "Does it have to be mushrooms? The rose garden has a circle around the fountain."

"Roses!" Auntie Toru cried. "Better! Shoushou, I come!" Her spindly legs carried her to Auntie Shou as Auntie Mo joined them in a circle. The man and wolf fought to give them space around the mushroom circle. Blue fire, pink water, and green electricity filled their hands. They put their palms toward the center, forming a ball of swirling elements before them. Phineas, Jax, and Killian drove back the thorns, until the fairies, with a cry, threw their hands forward and drove the ball of magic into the earth.

Auntie Mo grabbed Phineas's shirt sleeve. "The time is now! Hop!"

"Jump!" Auntie Shou shouted at the same time.

Jax went next as Killian backed toward the fairies. Auntie Toru grabbed the back of his shirt, and all four fell through the fairy circle.

Killian's every sinew was compressed through the magical portal, and his chest was wringed of all air. He whirled in black space, unable to see anything before a wavering light flickered ahead. He plunged into cold water. Twisting toward the light above, Killian kicked outward, finally hitting the bottom. He rocketed out of the fountain, sputtering and gasping for air.

Phineas and Jax both lay with the bulk of their bodies in the fountain, their heads and arms or front legs dangling over the edge. Auntie Toru and Auntie Shou stood on tiptoe as they waded to the side. A leg passed him in the water, and Killian reached to pluck out a sputtering Auntie Mo.

"What is the point of legs if they cannot reach!" she screeched as she clung to his forearm. "I am like a giant round stone!"

Auntie Shou began to laugh, followed by Auntie Toru's giggle and a wheezing sound from Jax. Auntie Mo splashed water at them, then she almost toppled again and squeezed Killian's arm tighter. He felt her legs wrap around his as he dragged her to the side. Auntie Mo was muttering and grumbling again, but she started to chuckle too. Phineas joined in with his bellow.

Auntie Shou looked them all over, plucking a thorn from Phineas's shirt. Auntie Toru set her hand into the water and from her fingertips, pink magic shifted through the water, pooling around them.

"Dunk your muzzle, dear ancient wolf," Auntie Shou said. "Toru will help with the poison."

Jax had been pawing at his nose and, at her beckoning, placed his nose under the water, blowing out bubbles. Killian frowned at the blood from his arm that discolored the lighter magical waters, but by degrees, he felt the numbness of his skin sharpen into a vigorous sting. Then the scrapes and punctures dulled to a shallow wound. Killian flexed and moved his muscles which were now sore, but fully functional.

Dragging themselves out of the water, they collapsed to the grassy earth. Behind them, some distance off, the massive wall of vines writhed in a wall, taller than the trees and circling the whole castle grounds. Killian froze in concern, but the vines stayed in a vertical wall—keeping things out—and didn't seem to notice their presence. Above them, black clouds rotated slowly, moving faster as they drew closer to the center of the vortex, directly above the tallest tower of the castle. Purple lightning rippled through them, and the air crackled with electric tension and constant rolls of thunder.

Auntie Shou pointed to the central tower and Killian followed her gaze. "She sleeps up there."

Killian rose to his feet. The way before them was clear all the way to the garden entrance.

"Why is it so quiet?" Killian said in a low voice.

Auntie Shou cringed beside him. "You should not ever say that word, my prince. But I don't know the answer. I can feel Zalina's power here, though I cannot see her."

Killian stepped toward the castle when his foot struck something like a stream of water that fell from the sky, shimmered, and dissipated. Now, instead of a peaceful castle, a horde of creatures with glowing eyes stood before them. The goblins were covered with horns, tattered wings, scales, and claws. The creatures were bent and jagged and writhing with malice. Each wore a belt with a red stone across its chest. Among them stood the gardener. He had a glassy gaze and held a spoon. Killian's chest iced over. He looked over the army again and saw scattered servants, eyes unfocused, one wielding a serving tray, another a book. Behind them stood Killian's men, armed with swords, all wearing the same dazed expressions.

"Puppets." Auntie Shou gasped, her palm flying to her chest.

Auntie Mo pointed between them. "See the marks on their cheeks?" Killian looked closer, glowing purple scratches were etched on each face. Their eyes also clouded with a faint purple hue. "They stand but still sleep."

Shuddering, Phineas stepped beside him. "I can't kill our people."

“We won’t,” Killian said. “Are these goblins like the ones at the castle?” He glanced at the fairies who were studying the group before nodding slowly. “Then we can fight them.” He pointed at his people, enslaved and ensorcelled. “Can you three release that spell?”

“Yes, Toru can. But Zalina controls the gob—” Auntie Shou started.

A cackle came from the balcony above them. Zalina stood there, her hands outstretched. She wore an inky black gown that draped below her shoulders and across her chest and fell to the ground. The violet stones lining her neckline gleamed in the eerie light of the swirling clouds. “Welcome home, princeling. Have you finally come to marry me? Let us have peace and unite our kingdoms. No blood needs to be shed.” She waved a hand, shifting the humans below half a step forward. “Your people won’t be forced to go against your wolf who will rip out their throats. They won’t have to fight dear Lord Phineas, who will slay them where they stand.”

Killian’s mind rushed through the possibilities. He couldn’t submerge the whole kingdom under her half-fairy, wholly evil, reign. But he knew he could trust his friends.

“I don’t wish for anyone to die today,” Killian said. He took a deep breath and stepped forward. “But I will not marry you. This ends today, Zalina. You end today. Unless you stop this madness.”

Her laughter pierced the air and into his marrow, morphing from a shrill laugh to a rasping, growling shriek. Zalina’s eyes glowed a haunting red, and her fingers elongated. Her skin turned to ashy pitch, like burnt birch, as her body expanded. Her face lengthened to that of a monster, scaled, with a sharp nose like an owl, massive eyes, and an abnormally large smile that spread from pointed ear to pointed ear. Six horns erupted around her head rising a foot behind her ears—they mimicked the crown she had worn in his imprisonment. Her body bent to reveal bat-like wings stretching from her back. She was more distorted, but less jagged than her horde of goblins, which looked like poor replications of her current monstrous form.

Her voice was now many voices, and she hissed like a snake. “My prince, you bring this upon your own people. You *will* marry me in the end.” Her wings snapped as she spread them wide. “Marry me, and I’ll even spare your pretty princess.”

Rage boiled within him, and he stepped forward, slicing the air with his sword. “If you have harmed her, Zalina, I will end you. If you touch her again, it will be the last thing you ever do. This ends now.”

Zalina cackled. “So feisty, my prince. Come. Let’s dance.” Her mouth chomped twice with her too-many toothed grin, and she flapped her hideous wings.

Ew, please don’t marry that. Jax shook his large head side to side.

“Let’s get her,” Phineas growled. “Stop her. Save the kingdom. Easy.”

Killian snorted. “Easy.”

The monsters before them began to chant in a language that Killian didn’t know. The chant grew louder and louder, and they banged their shields and stomped as thunder rumbled above them.

Auntie Shou began to sing quietly beside him, her hands coated in a blue, smoky magic.

“Silent forest, blackened clouds, a squealing wind, then thunder sounds.

Coming, coming, coming fast. I do not think that I will last.

Bind the window, catch the latch, our little frame cannot be matched.

I will stand within the storm. I will go, she’ll not be torn.”

Killian repeated the last line in his mind. *I will stand within the storm. I will go. She’ll not be torn. I will go. She’ll not be torn. I’m coming, Raela.* With a cry, Killian raised his sword and charged the line. *I will go.* Clattering into the goblins, Killian slammed his sword through them, whipping them to the side as he spun and struck again, hitting the gems. The monsters

disappeared in a puff of smoke as the gems broke. *She'll not be torn.* Though the creatures were shorter than him, they were faster and stronger than they should be. He ripped out a dagger and flung it at a monster about to stab through Jax's flank.

The fairies took to the sky on tiny iridescent wings. Auntie Shou's blue-hued magic wrapped around the servants as she plucked them from the rabble and threw them into the fountain. Auntie Toru stood beside the water, coating the surface with pink. Auntie Mo surged through the forces, zapping and battering all within the reach of her green lightning-coated rolling pin. The monsters screamed in fury, and all was chaos.

Killian ran headlong through the melee, shoving creatures off the steps as he raced up to the door to get into the castle and stop Zalina. At the top, three large ogres waited with similar thorn marks on their faces, but no red gem. They wielded large stone columns ripped from the side of his castle. When they spotted Killian, they roared and battered all the creatures in front of them in their wild attempt to reach him. Killian tried to skirt around the edges of the horde, but goblins surged toward him, forcing him up to the balcony railing. He delicately hurried across, but one ogre slammed the column into the main stone bracer before him, forcing him to halt and nearly throwing him off the edge. The ogre wouldn't let go of his weapon, so Killian ran up the column. He struck its temple with the pommel of his sword. As it fell, the creature spun around and knocked Killian in the chest with the back of its hand, sending him careening across the stone and right in front of another ogre.

This ogre grinned and lifted his massive stone weapon high before bringing it down on Killian. Killian rolled away and grabbed the creature's leg. The ogre tried again to crush him, but Killian moved at the last second, and the ogre slammed the stone onto its own foot. Before Killian could feel the hope of success, the last ogre took hold of his ankle and dragged him up into the air. He wielded a large vase and brought it toward Killian, but blue magic wrapped it and tugged it farther up.

"Go, Killian, go!" Auntie Shou shouted as her wings beat against the effort of the ogre.

He bent at the waist, grabbed a small dagger from his boot and stabbed it into the beast's wrist. The ogre tossed him, whipping wildly at Auntie Shou. Killian landed hard on the broken balcony, and the impact caused the ogre to stumble toward the edge. The rocks shook and heaved, and the far side of the balcony collapsed, taking the last ogre with it.

Scrambling toward the entrance as he held his bruised ribs, Killian looked over his shoulder. Auntie Shou had recovered and was already flying on her small iridescent wings back into the battle, batting down arrows aimed for her. Auntie Mo had taken to the air as well and was bludgeoning creatures from above. And Auntie Toru was guiding the castle staff on the ground toward safety, before returning to the fountain to heal others. Killian couldn't see Jax or Phineas and was about turn back when he heard the familiar call to arms. The magic of the fountain must have worked. Soaked soldiers stood ready to fight with Phineas at the head and Jax beside him.

Go, Killian. Stop her! Jax snarled.

Killian sprinted away.

CHAPTER 23

Quit

Killian

The castle still had some creatures to fight, as well as some illusioned staff that Killian disabled as gently as possible as he made his way up the floors. He slowed near the top of the third floor, panting and grasping his side where he had been hit by the ogre and thrown down hard onto the stone. His wrist ached, and his muscles were quaking with fatigue. His forearms were stinging at every cut that hadn't fully healed from the thorns, weakening the strength of his grip.

Yet his greatest challenges lay before him. Defeat Zalina, rescue his father, and wake Raela somehow. The tasks seemed impossible. Closing his eyes, he inhaled slowly. All he could do was move forward. And try. And fight. And not quit. Focus on only taking the next step.

If only his father could see him now.

Rolling his shoulders back, he regripped the pommel of his sword. It was time to find Zalina. He burst out from the landing and swept down the hallway toward the balcony where she had been and where he expected her to lie in wait for his arrival. A cat to his mouse.

But as he turned, he abruptly halted and backpedaled. He had come face-to-face with his father. Recovering, Killian rebalanced and was about to relax his stance when the skin on his neck prickled. Something was wrong. His father's normally sharp blue eyes had dulled like melting frost on the window, and his mouth hung slack and loose. Killian stepped to the side, and his father stepped to the side with him. Killian went through the quick motions of a soldier's warm-up with his sword. His father mimicked every form smoothly. Each movement showed his hard-earned skill, honed from a life of combat, but was also not quite right, like an echo distorting his original voice. His training was evident but altered. Unlike disabling a butler with a candelabra, his father might actually be able to fight back.

Killian frowned. His gaze caught two glowing eyes in the shadows. Zalina crouched in the corner of the room, her malformed body curved forward and her jagged wings tucked close behind her. She smiled, and her finger-long thin gray teeth glistened in the torchlight. Her red eyes watched him.

Killian tried to step toward her, but his father matched him fluidly.

"Stop this now, Zalina," Killian called.

"I have no more distractions—thanks to your helpful little fairies meddling with the goblins and the people. I am free to focus. Your father and I are of one mind."

Killian's sword slashed downward. "Leave him out of this."

Her laugh of many voices slithered around him. "He was always part of this. He's a tool at my disposal to get me what I want. If you would only consent to marry me, this whole thing would be over. We could reign. Together."

Killian's shoulders stiffened. "I will never marry you."

Zalina rose to her full height, still bent on her dragon-like legs. Spikes from her skull met in the back and continued between her wings in a single set of spikes down her spine. She paced the far hall. "You must. I deserve this. My mother is queen. I deserve to rule!"

"Every ruler must serve their people and fight for them, Zalina. No one *deserves* the role. To serve as a leader is a gift. A challenge. A fight to do what is right for all the people. Not just for yourself." Killian pointed his sword out the window. "Manipulating and battling your people is not the way to be a good ruler."

She spat on the ground. "I had no choice. First, the fairies meddled with the princess, then your mother used her star-forsaken blood magic. They made me this way."

“Zalina, you are responsible for yourself. You chose your own way. You can choose now to stop. To turn. To change.”

Her eyes darkened as her maw opened in a growl. “I choose you. I choose marriage by coercion.” She splayed out her clawed hands. “I can’t kill you directly. I need you to overcome the magic over your throne. I will threaten everything you hold dear until you marry me. Then you and I can rule this land together. You could be the leader you always wanted to be! Even better than your father!”

Killian scrutinized the slack face of his father—a face he hadn’t looked at in a long time. Not really. Looked around, looked down on, avoided, but not observed. The king’s face looked so wrinkled and vulnerable now. It wasn’t lined with criticism or disdain, but neither was it the laughing face he remembered from his youth. Now, he was just a man. A fallible man who perhaps had been trying his best. The vulnerability was startling. Perhaps he and his father weren’t so different after all.

Killian sighed, his right arm relaxing the tip of the sword on the ground. “I won’t marry you, Zalina. Stop this here, before anyone else gets hurt. This isn’t the right way.”

A cry, more rage than pain ripped from Zalina. She raised her hand, and his father flung himself forward, thrusting with his sword. Killian parried and sidestepped, the blow much harder than those of the smaller creatures. His ribs burned from the ogres’ attacks, but he pushed the pain aside. He searched for a way to incapacitate his father without hurting him. But it wouldn’t be easy. His father swung his sword, spinning and cutting down on him. Killian leapt aside and danced backward, guarding the pummeling hits that his father landed. His father’s sleeve fell back, and Killian glimpsed the glowing purple mark on his forearm. Killian ached to free him and glanced toward the balcony to see if a fairy would bring magic water. But the fairies were too far away.

In his distraction, his father landed a slicing blow on Killian’s leg, and he fell to one knee. His father lifted the sword. Killian surged forward on the other leg, trying to tackle his father, but the king turned at the last moment and Killian missed. He landed on the ground again and scrambled backward.

“What I see is a boy.” His father stepped toward him slowly, his voice stilted and monotone. “A boy that is happy when the sun is out. But when things get hard, when you face a struggle, you quit.”

Killian froze, those words all too familiar. The king struck down, and Killian rolled away.

“You have quit your whole life.” The king approached again. This time, his sword pointed at Killian’s face. “You quit. You will never be ready.”

The words struck deep. His father spoke his words from their argument. Was Zalina there that day? Or was this just a pattern of her puppetry, to reuse memories?

“You’ll never be king.”

Killian’s face crumpled. He shuffled back, unable to rise, trying to get away from the king, anything to gain distance. He kept one side toward Zalina, unwilling to let her slip out of sight. But he already felt defeated. The words were just as crushing today as they were the first time he’d heard them. He rolled out onto the balcony to avoid his father’s next blow.

But ... wait. Killian frowned. That wasn’t what his father had actually said. Killian had gone over the moment a hundred times since then. What had he actually said? Killian struggled to remember. He could picture the two of them in the office, at the end of the table. His father’s true voice rang in his mind.

“I hope you will be better than me ... but ... not today. Being king is about endurance, patience, and wisdom ... you must fight for every victory and never give up in the losses. Not run. Fight ... you are not yet ready.”

His father had said exactly what Auntie Shou had said, but Killian hadn’t been ready to hear him. Killian hadn’t been listening.

Yet.

Fight.

Get up.

His muscles burned. His broken ribs shifted and ground against each other.

Get up.

His father approached, sword raised. With a grunt, Killian rose and staggered to his feet, gripping his sword pommel tightly.

Killian turned slightly to Zalina, pointing his blade at her. "Leave my father out of this. My fight is with you."

Zalina pushed off the wall, her sashaying walk discordant with her monstrous body. "Very well." She waved a casual hand at the king, who dropped his sword. With a quick pull, she grabbed the king by the lapel of his jacket and flung him over the balcony edge.

Screaming, Killian dove after him, but was too late. The king was airborne. At that moment, Zalina released her mental hold on the king. Killian watched, frozen in time, as his father's every feature blanched in terror. They held each other's gaze, then the king fell out of sight.

Killian whirled and rushed toward Zalina.

"You killed him!" he yelled as he slammed the sword at her, but she blocked it with the scales on her forearm.

Hissing, she slashed back with her claws. "If only you would consent! You bring this upon yourself. Just marry me already!"

He slammed his sword, bashing her backward a step. "Never."

"Phineas will be next. Then Jax." She growled, her vicious face pinched taut. She pulsed her wings, moving backward before landing and throwing herself at him again.

A coal of anger ignited to flame in Killian's chest, and he cried out as he leapt forward. He threw nearby vases and a tapestry at her as he ran, ducking under her claws. Slipping a dagger from his waistband, he stabbed her tail, pinning it into the wooden floorboards. He flipped around, still on the ground as she turned to free herself. He fainted, and she fell for it in her haste. Lunging, she threw herself at Killian, and the sword in Killian's hand slid into her chest.

Zalina gaped at the sword hilt-deep between the scales in her breastbone. Her voice was gargled. "I will end you. I will kill them all!" Blood speckled her lips as she laughed. Wrenching the sword down, Killian pulled it free and held it above his head.

He called for the light. A solid beam pierced through the swirling clouds, through the balcony opening, and onto his sword. The whole weapon seared his palm and with a cry, Killian swung downward. In an explosion of light and purple smoke, the monster collapsed to the floor.

Killian held his sword at the ready, waiting for some final curse or magic to revive her. He regretted the need for violence to stop her, but there was no other way. The light brightened as it landed on her sickly form, and with a sizzle and a sudden snap, her body collapsed into a pile of ash.

Seconds passed. Then minutes. Killian stood, sword drawn and muscles ready for another attack. But it never came. The ash remained. Slowly, Killian relaxed his sword and softened his stance. Zalina was defeated. He only wished he had ended this in time to save his father.

Killian slowly approached the edge of the balcony, afraid to look over and see the sprawled body of the king. Afraid to take account of the losses his men suffered. Afraid for Phineas and Jax and the aunties. But if he were king now, it was time to bear up under the weight of truth. So he looked.

On the far side of the gardens, the wall of vines shuddered and faded like a storm that had passed. Illusioned soldiers and servants were recovering. Some shook their heads while others held their heads in their hands, finally released from Zalina's

spell. The swirling clouds above dissipated, revealing a deep blue sky. The light of the sun flooded the land. The goblins all looked toward the light and, as one, closed their eyes and faded into dust.

Auntie Toru stood with her arms out, protecting the awakened servants by the orchard, and Jax and Phineas stood beside the fountain with some of his men. Phineas glanced up at him and smiled. In the fountain behind him, a very wet, very grumpy king emerged sputtering from the pink waters.

His father lived.

Killian laughed, which drew the eyes of the people of his castle. Even those who had not been submerged in the magical water had been freed by Zalina's death.

He raised his sword to the sky. The magical light fixed on it and reflected out in a thousand beams.

"We've done it! Zalina is defeated!" Killian shouted. The people below cheered with raised fists. Auntie Mo grabbed the waist of an embarrassed-looking soldier in a massive hug. Auntie Toru grabbed a kitchen girl and spun her around as she danced. Sauntering to stand by Phineas, Auntie Shou held onto his arm as she nodded upward, her gaze flickering up toward the central tower.

Raela.

CHAPTER 24

Failures

Killian

Killian's heart picked up pace as he turned back toward his castle. With a burst of energy, he ignored his wounded leg and ribs and rushed through the halls, passing the confused servants. He ran up the many stairs to the solarium at the top of the tower.

Killian hesitated only a moment before he burst into the room. Raela lay on the massive daybed, surrounded by the light from the windows. Her face was serene and pain-free but lacked the simmering sunshine her smile usually carried, the fire and vigor and passion that burst from her very heartbeat. She was sleeping. Her magic slept too.

He moved slowly toward her, then sat on the bed's edge beside her, regarding her face. Her hair was golden in the sideways light of sunset.

Her curse was unbroken.

"Oh, Raela," he said aloud, and he grasped her hand, holding it gently in his. That such an evil creature would ever try to crush someone with so lovely a heart and soul was horrific. True evil.

But now what?

Killian pressed the back of Raela's hand against his forehead as he clenched his eyes shut. He had escaped the nightmare, the castle, and the forest. He had broken through the thorns, fought his way through the castle, saved his people, and defeated Zalina. But why wasn't Raela free? Why wasn't she awake? Zalina was gone.

Searching her face and arms, he found no purple thorn marks and no red gem. Her eyes, when he opened them, were not covered by a purple haze. She just ... slept.

A tear seeped from the corner of his eye.

He had fought so hard. He had endured. He had won.

And still she slept.

Killian had fought to be worthy of the throne and had acted to serve others. He had accepted himself. He had faced his father and was now ready to accept whatever his father chose.

But his heart cracked, bursting with the love he had for her. He wanted her.

Her goodness pushed him to soften, and her kindness called him to be the best version of himself. But he wanted her. Her mind, body, and soul. To love her, and treasure her, and stand out of her way as she thrived and blossomed. Living, he hoped, alongside him.

But he had failed. Once again.

The old temptation to quit and pull back before he'd risked too much echoed in his mind, the comfort of safety and rest and not even trying. Retreat and hide. He'd failed his mother, he had repeatedly failed his father. And now he had failed the woman he loved.

Killian wept, bitterness rising within him, suffocated by guilt.

His gaze lingered on the gentle arc of her eyebrows and the lift of her nose. He could almost still hear her voice and feel the squeeze of her hand.

No. He couldn't quit. He had to find a way, had to free her, had to release her from this curse so she could live her life vibrantly and decide for herself—with or without him. She was now free from the forest where she had been hidden. If she chose to leave him, he would let her. He loved her enough to let her be free too. He would search every book, try every bit of magic the fairies could think of to free her. And he wouldn't stop until she was awake.

He studied her delicate blue veins, then flipped her hand over and followed the lines of her palm with his fingertips. Killian traced down each of them and then he froze.

A golden-brown splinter stuck in the tip of her index finger. He delicately grabbed it and pulled it out, throwing it to the brightly-lit floor where it smoked to ash in the beam of light. A tiny bead of blood raised in the wound. He brushed it aside with his thumb and kissed the fingertip.

“A kiss for the pain,” he said with a sad smile. How he wished he could go back to the time she had said that to him, holding his hand in hers. He sighed.

Then her hand clasped his. He heard her take a breath.

Blinking twice, he dared to look at Raela’s face. Her blue eyes flashed back at his. He was elated, ecstatic.

She was ... furious?

She turned her head away. “Go away, Killian.”

“What?”

“Go away.” She turned to him, her eyes glassy with tears. “You kissed another. But it matters not. I am promised to another man.” She sniffed, and turned her eyes again, squeezing her lids. “So go away.”

She tried to pull her hand away, but Killian held fast. “Raela, what you saw was not a betrayal. She forced it. I didn’t want it. I was coming for you.”

“But I am promised.”

“And I am promised,” he said with a smile.

She threw her free hand to the sky. “Then we are two ones-who-know-nothing. Two ... two *fools*.”

Killian stifled his low chuckle and tucked his thumb beside her chin, guiding her face back toward his. He spoke softly. “I am promised to a princess. From our neighboring kingdom. Who was born eighteen years ago and hidden from an evil fairy. I hadn’t met her because we thought her lost, but she was just hidden from the evil magic—hidden with her aunties.”

Raela’s brows pinched as she searched his face, as if afraid to believe him.

He continued. “I was to be wedded to her on her birthday, the day she returned from hiding and would be spared from a terrible curse. There was to be a celebration. The day the prince met his princess, and they wedded and united their countries.”

Raela’s eyes widened and tears built up again. “This is what my aunties said.” Her brow furrowed. “You are a prince,” she said with a hint of accusation. “You never told me. That is a big front goose.”

Chuckling, Killian leaned forward. “We may be fools, but we are fools who are promised to each other. You are the one I was promised to. I am the one you were betrothed to on the day of your birth. But it is still a choice that is ultimately up to us. I know who I am. I know what I want.” He brushed her chin again. “I want you. But”—he cleared his throat—“I don’t know what *you* want.”

Raela sat up and regarded him for a breath. Her eyes sparkled, and the brilliance of the sun burned brighter and warmed the room. She flung her arms around his neck, clinging in a fierce squeeze. Killian wrapped her up and buried his face in her hair, taking in her scent and the warmth of her soul. Her whisper tickled his neck. “I want *you*.” She breathed, the warmth caressing his neck. “Only you. Ever you.”

He stroked lines down her back, his voice thick. “*Raela*, who shattered the curse of my arrogance and selfishness, *meta* the one who gave me hope to be a better man, and *nashi* the one who I can rest in, in whom I can trust. With you, I don’t have to strive. I can just be me. I want to be the best version of me.” He inhaled slowly. “Every day, I will pray your name. And I will pray I can be a blessing to you as you’ve been to me. Raelametanashi, will you marry me?”

Raela pulled back from their embrace, studying his face. Her gaze landed on his lips. His chest caught fire. Setting her hand on his cheek, she leaned forward. Her breath tickled his skin.

“Killian, will you kiss me?”

Killian shifted forward, burying one hand into her hair behind her head, his other hand sweeping along her waist and gladly obliged. Her lips were soft but burned him like fire, setting him ablaze. His world exploded into glittering facets of color and light. The room glowed brighter and he felt the warm wind sweep through his hair. He pulled her tightly, shifting his hand through soft strands that drifted down her back. She pressed closer, her passionate and vibrant self swept up into the moment. She slipped her hand up his jaw to around his ear, tugging him toward her.

Pulling back, she gasped for air, her eyes glittering above her perfect smile. Killian’s soul alighted.

“I like kissing you,” she whispered.

Killian laughed, relief blended with joy and the pleasure of everything that she had brought into his life. Turning back to her, his thumb dragged along the bottom lip. “I will happily kiss you again. But I don’t think that counts as an answer to my question. Will you marry me?”

She leaned in again and kissed him briefly. “Yes. I will marry you. Will you kiss me many times?”

“Yes. As many times as you’d like.”

She nodded, her brows pinched together seriously. “There will be many.”

He kissed the tip of her nose, and his heart warmed to watch a rose hue stain her cheeks.

“There may never be enough for me.”

CHAPTER 25

Reunion

Raela

Raela's lips still tingled from their kiss. Kisses. She could still feel his fingers on her hair, the warmth of his body, and the strength of his grasp as he held her. She glanced down to their entwined fingers. The heat from his hand raced up from their palms to her heart, which was near bursting with happiness.

She closed her eyes for only a moment to relish the sensation. This was real. Killian was here. And he loved her.

"Killian?" She turned. "Why do you smell like the marshes?"

He chuckled, and the sounds heated her chest. "It's been a whirlwind of a day for me, my love." He told her how he had defeated Zalina but squeezed her hand before carrying on too long. "I'll tell you more, later, but I bet your aunties are worried." He kissed her again, and the world was heated bliss. "Also, we need to go meet your parents."

Her parents.

As they descended several flights of stairs from the castle tower to the main entry, her heart galloped in her chest. Killian loved her. Her parents were at the castle. Her mind whirled through all the emotions. Excited to meet them, terrified of what they might think of her, grief at the relationship they had lost to keep her safe. She brushed her hands over the blue gown that her aunties had shoved her in and tucked herself closer to Killian. She grasped his arm tightly. Sounds of animated chatter echoed up the stone walls, and as they came out the door, the halls of the castle were full of servants and nobles enthusiastically recounting all that had passed.

A crooning wail pierced the cacophony as a spriggy fairy flew herself across the gaping heads toward Raela.

"Auntie Toru!" Raela cried, reluctantly letting Killian go to catch her auntie in a massive hug.

"Raelametanashi!" Auntie Toru repeated, dripping tears over Raela's clothing. "You're awake! The curse is broken!"

Auntie Mo approached on the ground at a more sedate pace, but her hug was no less fierce. "My child, we were so worried. But your prince—Oh! Oh, Raela." But Auntie Mo's voice was stopped up, so she stepped back and gestured behind her.

Raela's heart stopped beating in her chest. It had been years, but time passes slowly for fairies, and the face before her was one her heart remembered well. Auntie Toru released her embrace, and Raela stepped forward. "Auntie Shou?"

"Little cub, how much you've grown." Her auntie's smile grew in warmth and wrinkles, and Raela flung herself into the old woman's arms. "I've been waiting for your prince," Auntie Shou murmured. "I'm so sorry I couldn't be there to watch you grow up. And I'm so sorry I left. It was the only way to save you."

A sob broke from Raela. Years of grief melted into sweet relief. "I'm sorry I wandered too far, Auntie Shou."

"Oh, my dear. It wasn't your fault. I was needed in the future—at Zalina's castle. It was never your fault." Her auntie patted her cheek. "Besides, you were a child. What child doesn't wander?" Raela felt a wave of relief flood through her.

Then a warm hand pressed against her shoulder. Killian leaned forward. "Raela, there is one last reunion."

Raela's heart beat hard and fast when she realized what he meant. She wiped her tears and reached for his hand. Her aunties gathered behind them.

The crowd parted and whispers grew, as they headed from the main hall to the breakfast room. A guard, seeing Killian approach, stood to attention and opened the doors for them to enter.

As the doors shut behind them, her ears rang at the sudden silence. She could hear her heart pounding upon seeing the four adults gathered at the other end of the room.

Killian led her forward, his presence and the shuffling of her auntie's feet a balm for her nerves. Phineas nodded to them both, before stepping away from the other three. Killian gestured toward a large man with a golden crown. "Father, I would

like you to meet Raela, the one I love.” And turning to the couple beside the king, Killian’s voice thickened. “Raela, these are my father’s best friends, the king and queen of Walworth, Jonat and Marisha... your parents.”

The man and woman were clinging to each other as if to hold the other upright. They were tall and fair, her mother’s blue-green eyes lined with eyelashes the same blonde as her light, almost-white hair, a whisp lighter than her own. Her father’s hair was more like dried corn, an earthy yellow. And he had bright blue eyes. Eyes just like hers.

Her mother reached forward, her hand shaking. “Raina? I mean ...” She glanced at Killian, the fairies, and then back at her daughter. “Raela?”

Raela stepped forward, her heart in her throat and her mind clouded. She didn’t know this couple, but they looked like her. She studied their faces and saw the same love she had always seen in the eyes of her aunties. Except her parents looked afraid and sad. She reached out for her mother.

Her gesture released her parents from their frozen state. Her mother let out a cry and pulled her in closely. Her father wrapped them both in her arms, sniffing back his own tears. Raela felt a wellspring of emotion, and happy tears pushed at her lids, but a giggle bubbled within her. She pulled back and smiled at her parents. Her father wiped at his eyes, while her mother brushed her palm down Raela’s hair. The wind swirled warm through the room as Raela’s joy spun within her.

“My beautiful child. I’m so glad you’re okay. I’m so happy the prince broke the curse,” her mother murmured.

Killian chuckled. “She broke mine.”

Raela turned toward him and stepped back into his reach. “I’m glad too. Killian is a good man.”

Killian straightened beside her as his father came toward them. Placing his left hand on Killian’s right shoulder, he gazed at his son. Killian placed his hand on his father’s shoulder in the soldiers’ greeting. The king smiled. “He is a good man. Killian, you saved our kingdom. Against magic. Against monsters. Against unlikely odds. Against *me*. I couldn’t break the hold of her magic. I could see it all and do nothing to stop it.” His eyes glanced to where his father had cut through his leg. “And I hurt you.” The king continued, “Phineas has told me about all that you’ve been through and overcome.”

“I’m sorry, Father. I didn’t see what you were trying to teach me all these years.”

The king tugged at his collar. “I-I am sorry for my harshness, Killian. I was wrong to ever make you feel responsible for your mother’s death. I have you now, and I was the fool for never seeing the gift that you are. The gift that she gave me ... Killian, I am so proud of you. It was I who failed you. Can you ever forgive me?”

Killian’s grip tightened on his father’s shoulder as his throat bobbed. He nodded, and his father grasped him in a massive hug. Raela wasn’t sure why there was so much back hitting, but they looked *happy*.

Together with her love, her parents, and her aunties, Raela’s happy tears fell anew.

CHAPTER 26

The Wedding

Killian

Killian stood at the end of the throne room on a raised platform, his people gathered before him murmuring quietly as the instruments played a gentle tune. Phineas stood beside him, and Jax stood beside Phineas. Both were panting and grumbling about the heat from the many hearths lining the massive room.

The fairies and woodland creatures had outdone themselves. Every window was lined with lace and sheer white fabric; every chandelier glittered with polished stones that cast rainbow light below; and bushels of potted flowers lined the aisle, the platform, the throne chairs, and the rows of seats.

He chuckled quietly. Killian didn't care where they were married; he would marry her in a muddy cave or a wrecked castle. As long as he married *her*. But allowing the fairy aunties to decorate had made the room absolutely magical—even if it was overly stuffed with flowers. More importantly, giving the fairies this work had distracted them from their usual “helpful” mischief.

Jonat, Marisha, and his father stood at the next platform, in front of three thrones, looking royal and majestic, but even his father swept a finger at his eyes as the music swelled.

The throne room doors opened with a boom. The people rose to their feet. Killian stopped breathing.

The aunties entered first. Auntie Mo threw flowers with assertive force and bustled down the aisle. Auntie Toru followed, blindly throwing flowers as she wept, loudly. Her high-pitched wailing could be heard even above the music. Auntie Shou came last, her face beaming in her toothless turtle way. She had lined her hair with daisies, aspen twigs, and a live robin which fluttered each time Auntie Shou took a step. She tossed the flowers in the air and pranced down the aisle merrily.

The elk followed, his antlers decorated with wreaths and flowers. A shuffling of murmurs rose from the crowd as the bear cubs entered with their mother and sauntered down the aisle. Though his people had been warned, Killian still smiled at their clear desire to run from the creatures. The aunties and the ancients took their places—the aunties on the side of the bride, with the elk and the bears, while Jax and Phineas stood beside him.

The music hushed, and the crowd turned. When the doors opened again, his bride stood before them.

All the light in the room seemed dim when compared to her radiance. No beauty had existed before she arrived. Her white gown shimmered as if made of a thousand pearls. Delicate floral gems glittered down her bare shoulders. Her eyes drifted up from her bouquet to meet his.

She smiled. The wind swirled hot around his collar, and the rest of the room disappeared.

The few moments between them dragged to eons until she was finally standing before him. Her bright face so close. Her gaze enraptured with his own features.

As he took her hands, she blushed, and the room surged with brilliant sunlight. He knew his father was saying words beside him, but all he heard was Raela's breathy giggle, and all he knew was that within moments, he would be hers, and she would be his.

She squeezed his hands and gave him a wink, and Killian realized it was his turn to speak. He spoke in L'Turetian, since these ancient vows were only for her. Auntie Shou translated for the people.

“Raelametanashi, I give you my heart, mind, body, and soul. I will honor you and treasure you forevermore. I will know you as the stone knows the stream and the willow knows the sun. I will love you as the earth loves the sky and the day loves the night. The seasons will grow us and change us, and I will be your constant companion. I will protect you and defend you. I will

correct you and forgive you. And I will forever remain softened toward you, as you are my one true love. Today and tomorrow, I choose you. This I vow.”

Raela swiped a tear from her cheek, as Auntie Toru blew her nose like a horn into a handkerchief, causing Raela to giggle again.

Raela’s voice was thick as it replied in her favorite tongue, the sounds like music and magic all their own. “Killian, I give you my heart, mind, body, and soul. I will honor you and respect you forevermore. I will know you as the seed knows the earth and the leaf knows the wind. I will love you as the flowers love the rain and the sea loves the moon. The seasons will grow us and change us, and I will be your constant companion. I will protect you and defend you. I will correct you and forgive you. And I will forever remain softened toward you, as you are my one true love. Today and tomorrow, I choose you. This I vow.” She was whispering by the end, tears running down her face.

Killian reached over and wiped them from her cheek. She turned into his hand, pressing her cheek into his palm and he was undone. His heart was brimming with affection and joy, with warmth and with hope. A day he had dreaded his entire life was now the happiest day of his life.

In Common, they repeated after his father. “United together, we vow to uphold the value and honor of the people and ancients within our kingdoms. We vow our humble service to each other and to our people. Through our marriage, we vow to always act in the best interests of our united kingdom. Two people become one household. Two nations become one kingdom. We pledge ourselves to all as servant leaders. We vow our lives to this holy calling.” The service continued, but Killian didn’t hear the words. He only had eyes for his bride.

His father and her parents now stood beside them and, together, bound a long silken cloth around his and Raela’s hands. They spoke in unison. “We vow to support you, guide you, correct you, and love you. May you grow in character and affection as you serve one another and the kingdom.”

King Harolt announced, “It is our pleasure to present to you, Prince Killian and Princess Raelametanashi, now joined forever in love. Do you vow to support their marriage? Do you subject yourself to their leadership? Do you uphold the values and laws of our united kingdom, henceforth no longer Walworth and Norwood, but now the sovereign kingdom of Norworth?”

The people replied in one voice. “We do.”

“Then I pronounce you husband and wife, king and queen of Norworth!”

The crowd cheered as the music started again, and Killian and Raela led the way through the castle, toward the feast in the forbidden forest meadow.

In the hall, Raela pressed into Killian’s side, nudging him toward an open door, forgetting—perhaps deliberately—decorum and royal expectations. Killian looked behind him to be sure no one was watching too closely, before ducking into the small library. Pulling the door shut, he captured her face in his hands.

“Raela, I love you.”

Her eyes glittered as the room lit up, glowing with her affection and certainly exposing their location to anyone paying attention. “I love you too.”

He captured her stunning lips in a heated kiss and pressed her back against the side of the bookshelves. She snorted as she stumbled a bit, stepping on the train of her lovely dress. “This dress is not made for backward.” She giggled, as she swept it out from behind her.

Her eyes found his as she straightened. Her palms pressed against his chest. Tilting her chin up, her words breathed against his lips. “More kissing, please.”

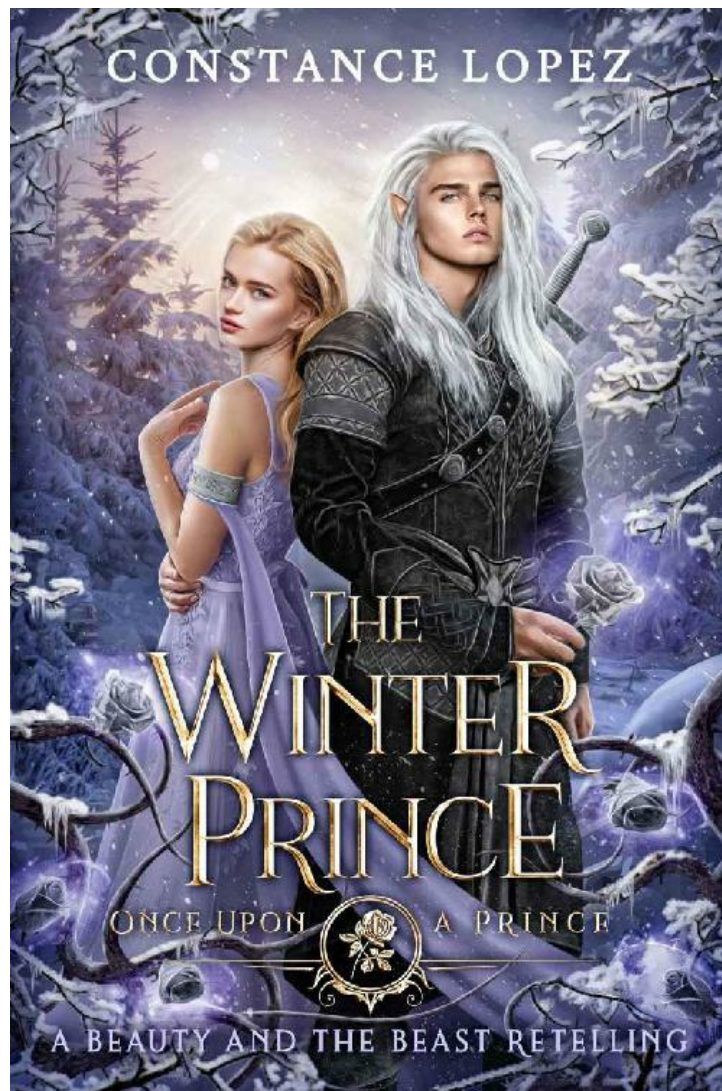
Wrapping her closer, careful not to disturb her hair or step on the dress now beside him, Killian leaned over her, hovering a heartbeat away.

He smiled broadly. “As the lady wishes.”

CHAPTER 27

The Winter Prince by Constance Lopez

Next in Once Upon A Prince:



Available December 15, 2023

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A beastly prince. A cursed land. One last hope.

Breaking his bargain with another fae has earned Revi, Prince of the Winter Court, a terrible curse: he lives as a beast and must watch his people suffer under a withering blight. The only cure? A heart freely given.

When a human patrol steals one of Revi's magical roses, a sliver of opportunity strikes. He agrees to spare their lives in return for a woman who must live in his castle for a year and a day. But could such a beauty learn to love a beast like him?

Although Kienna was warned of conniving fae before her arrival at the Winter Court, the Winter Prince, while beastly, is not the monster she expected. Her dreams plague her—or more specifically, the enigmatic silvery man who walks them does. She's determined to find him in the waking world and free him from his imprisonment.

Her dream prince begs her not to trust her eyes. But... can she trust her heart?

***The Winter Prince*, a retelling of Beauty and the Beast, is book 12 of *Once Upon A Prince*, a multi-author series of clean fairy tale retellings. Each standalone story features a swoony prince fighting for his happily ever after.**

Check Out the rest of Once Upon A Prince at onceuponaprinceseries.com!

Read the first chapter below:

Blood coated Revi's paws and muzzle. Annoyance prickled across his hide, making his fur stand on end. He hated to be dirty, to let the gore and grime cling to him after a battle. He wanted nothing more than to return home, wash the death from himself, and curl up on the hearth.

But as he got closer to the castle, he felt a foreign presence. Intruders. They didn't have the hot stickiness to them that the monstrous zruyeds did, but they were still other—their signatures did not carry the familiar cold wildness of a Winter Elyri. They didn't belong in his Court.

Growling in irritation, Revi slipped through the forest, his dappled silver and white coat mingling with the play of light and shadows between the trees.

He hadn't made it much farther when a sense of loss scraped sharply along his magical awareness, like a set of claws against his mind. Something was horribly wrong.

He pressed his magical awareness out as he neared his castle. Intruders indeed. He could sense at least a dozen of them. He pushed himself faster. He would rid himself of them just as he had rid the Court of the zruyeds, and then he would groom, and then, finally, he could rest, if only for a short while.

The forest broke ahead of him. The breeze shifted his way, bringing the scent of leather, oil, and steel to his nose. His hackles rose.

Humans. What were humans doing in his Court?

Threaded among the other smells was a hint of something cold like the first frost or of an evergreen when all other trees have gone to sleep for the winter.

Good. Enlo had already intercepted them. At least they weren't roaming his Court freely. He crouched and leaped through the air, landing lightly on a branch high above the ground. From his perch, he followed his regular route through the treetops closer and closer to the castle wall before making the leap from the forest to the wall. He slunk along the top, following the odor and otherness of humans with his magic. He rounded the Winter Court's castle grounds, going from the west gardens all the way around to the east gardens, but his trail stopped before he reached the front gardens and main gate.

No. The humans had not only broken into his Court, but they'd managed to wander into his garden. His irritation turned to icy stabs of anger. He leaped from the castle wall's walkway up onto the parapet. There they were, a dozen humans, all male, most with weapons in hand, and garbed like warriors in blue and grey uniforms that suggested they were part of an organized militia of some sort.

They smelled of horses, but they had none with them, and they looked battered, as if they had just come from a battle. They stood in a crescent in his own private garden—which was nowhere near the front gates. Had they come with the sole purpose of stealing his roses? If they were only wandering, surely they would have kept to the front gardens. Those were the ones the gardeners had tried to adjust to the harsh summer climate his Court was subjected to, so there was a variety of things growing—or at least, attempting to grow.

But his garden was nearly barren. What usually grew here could not withstand the scorching summer sun, and he hadn't let the gardeners replace any of it. The only thing thriving was the rosebush in the center of the garden. The rosebush that Enlo stood beside, facing off against one of the humans whose clothes—worn as they were now—were finer. The man also looked to be—according to human age—older than most of his comrades, based on the silver threaded through his otherwise brown hair. He was almost certainly the leader.

The leader who held a plucked silvery frostrose in his grip. That must have been the source of the clawing sensation against Revi's mind.

All the anger Revi thought he'd felt before was eclipsed in a blizzard of rage at that sight. He roared and leaped from the parapet down among the men. The group scattered away at the sudden appearance of a giant bloodied frostcat, but Revi ignored them all. He prowled toward the one holding his rose. He would take it back. He would rip it from the man's hands, and then tear the man apart for good measure.

"Ah, there's our illustrious prince," Enlo said in Kasmian Common, his tone light and amused. He ran a hand through his cropped silver hair, for all appearances entirely at ease despite the situation.

"Enlo," Revi growled in the Elyri tongue, "why have you suffered these humans to live? Why is he holding my rose?"

The human's grip tightened on the rose, his skin paling as if frosted over.

Revi prowled closer, and Enlo raised a placating hand.

"The deed was done by the time I reached them, cousin," he said, his tone still far too soothing.

"Again I ask, why are they still alive? You," he snarled, baring his fangs at the man and switching to speak in Kasmian Common so the human was certain to understand. "You have trespassed on my Court, and you've taken what is mine. The lifeblood of my Court. Life for life. Would you stand and die for your men, or shall I slaughter them in your stead?"

The human stiffened, one hand going for the hilt of his sword.

"I wouldn't," Enlo said mildly in Common. "If you antagonize him further, your only choice will be the latter. If you'll but give me a moment, gentlemen." He pitched his voice lower and switched back to Elyri. "Cousin, a word."

Enlo stepped a few paces away from the group. Revi followed, careful to keep at an angle where he could still see the humans. His tail lashed angrily behind him. "Why is that human still holding my frostrose?"

"Because this seems like a perfect opportunity." Enlo tilted his head toward the humans, who had regrouped. Several of them had drawn their swords, but not the leader. The leader still clutched the frostrose, his face pale but otherwise set in an unreadable expression.

"A life for a life, you said," Enlo continued. "Could it not be a life given instead of one taken?" Revi started to growl, but Enlo hurried on, his words rushing together. "No, hear me out, cousin. You know what the curse says. This could be the key to breaking it. Our people can't take much more. They were made for ice and cold, not for this blistering heat. We've discussed this. It's too hot for our crops. The sun leeches more strength from our bones every day. We're running out of time to rid ourselves of this curse."

Revi shook his head, a snarl building in his chest.

"Revi!" Enlo snapped. "You must at least try."

Something in his cousin's tone stopped him. He tore his gaze away from the humans and looked at Enlo.

"Please, cousin," Enlo said softly.

Revi pushed back the growl that grew up in his chest. His cousin held on to fragile hope far better than Revi did. Revi had caused the curse through his own actions. And he had tried—he had tried so many things to break the curse gripping his Court. Swearing himself to his people, having them swear devotion to him. Nothing had worked. He hated that he had to stoop to the aid of humans, but of course that was probably by intentional design on the Summer Queen's part.

If he could break it through his own actions, fulfill the conditions without relying on anyone else, he would have done so long ago. The fact that he couldn't had rankled since the curse had begun. A part of him still hoped he would figure out something on his own—

But until he did, he could at least go through the motions for Enlo, even if he hated the thought of a human wandering around his castle.

“Very well.” Revi stalked back to the soldiers and began pacing in front of the leader, gaze drawn to his frostrose. “There’s a third alternative to pay for your crime.”

“Anything that will save the life of my men,” the leader said, his words clipped.

Revi bared his teeth. “Anything, human?”

The wariness in the man’s mien increased tenfold, but he nodded. “I do not seek to spill blood this day.”

“Then you will return to your lands, and you will send back a woman. One unmarried, most beautiful among your people.”

The man’s eyes widened as Revi spoke, but Revi continued, ignoring the play of emotions across the man’s face, “You will give her that rose, and she will return by the next full moon, or I will come and hunt down every last one of you.”

Silence descended on the garden as full and still as a midwinter night.

“Then what will you do with her?” the leader asked. He stood tall, kept his voice steady, but he could not hide the fear in his scent. It made Revi’s predator instincts sharpen. “I won’t offer a woman for you to murder in our place.”

“She will be unharmed. She must only stay for a year and a day, according to Elyri custom, and during that time, she will be cared for, given anything she asks, protected like one of our own.” The man’s expression still held disbelief, so Revi growled and added, “So I swear it on my name as the Heart of the Winter Court.” Magic threaded out of him as he crafted the bargain—thinner than if he had used his true name, but he wouldn’t give that to humans, not even for this. A nameless bargain would have to suffice.

The man’s eyes widened yet again; perhaps he too felt the magic as it wound around Revi and him and the rose in his hand, anchoring there.

“And it’s that or my prince will ensure that none of you leave—ever,” Enlo added, his voice pleasant and entirely at odds with his words.

The humans behind the leader shifted, sharing glances, adjusting their grips on their swords as if they actually thought those would do anything against Revi.

Revi bared his fangs. He hoped the man would opt to fight. He’d rather fresh blood on his claws than the care of a human woman.

The man drooped and sighed heavily. “It’ll be as you say. I will escort her back here myself—or I will return alone and offer myself up to die.”

Maybe the humans had no great beauties to offer. Maybe the man still doubted Revi’s word. He chose to ignore that possibility before it tempted him to kill the man here and now to be done with it.

“Escort her back,” he said, “but do not enter my castle grounds again. Humans, save for her, are not welcome here.”

The man’s jaw clenched, but Revi turned toward the castle. He took a few steps and then paused and looked back over his shoulder. “And if any of you touch my frostroses again, I will know, and you will have lost your last chance at freedom. Now get out of my Court.”

With that, he left, his hide still prickling with anger.

Enlo had gotten what he wanted; a human woman was coming to the Winter Court.

Revi only hoped this bargain did not fail as spectacularly as the last one he’d made had.

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ONCE UPON A PRINCE BINGO

Front goose	Licking soap	Cover with fireflies	Radish-stealing gnome	Cover with roses
Sunburst	Cover with arrows	Cover with pottery	Cover with frost	Sweets
Painting	Cover with ribbons		Cover with a frog	Honey caves
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Cover with tentacles	Dragons on the beach	Cover with shoes	An extremely fluffy rabbit	A ratty hat

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CHAPTER 28

Language Appendix

Link to the full dictionary: <https://www.aloracarter.com/l-turitian-dictionary>

Chapter 1

Titu bet ra? — Who are you?

Hep. — Wait.

Shaana honte’aco, treka pa e’lonmar, tros shusha huh u ranarana maneta?

Dear Noble wolf, ancient as stone, what wind blows you to our forest?

Na Lomai’tas tarat ra slit’at. Ritun ra hassinah’tas hi. E’otu shum bet Kak.

I don’t know how you passed through. But you are not welcome here. The time to go is now.

Na olit shupet delam’aco. Ra bet’tas bet hi. N’olitsa

I need to tell my aunts. You aren’t supposed to be here. I’m sorry (I have debt).

Ra, Shaana honte’aco, noma onk.

You, noble wolf, can stay.

Chapter 4

Ra lonsha'tas bamme las'ho. Ha bet kuncham.

You should not touch that. They are poison.

Toru ra kunch'at las'hi'as? Rana noma'tas omnom hasha.

Why did you kill these? We can't eat them.

Calle las? Haro bet pa grun pa e'clanta.

Another one? He is as big as the Moose.

Shaana honte'aco, ra nuret.

Dear Ancient Wolf. You have returned.

Rana hemuma'il ga las'hi. Toru bet ra hi ga ranarana maneta?

We'll work on that. Why are you here in our forest?

Grumba? — Bear?

Isa lonmar. — Small stone.

Isa otu ya etera. — Brief moment of beauty.

Grun peket. — big noise aka Blue Jays

Otu bet'at grun. Dela'aco arot'il ken nami. Na olit shum.

It has been too long(the moment was great). My auntie will be looking for me. I have to go.

Kainara hi, Nurenitam. Na olit arotonmaram ken ra laanma.

Meet here, after the night (tomorrow). I have questions for you to answer.

Chapter 7

Na meta ra lonmai betkunchil mea dela'aco arot hi nara wot sasen.

I hope you know I will be dead if my aunties find me here with you.

E'umas bet e'papat! Na lonmai treka L'Turetian gri, ritun, Titu ranarana umas bet e'papat?

The letters are the same! I know ancient L'Turetian as well, but how, is it our letters are the same?

Las'hi shaso'il wottas utu'as. Ra bet'tas nara'at lonmar.

This will save so much time. You're not ignorant.

Nami dela'aco. E'otu ra shum bet kak.

My aunties, they come. You must go.

Raelametanashi! Nami aco kai, e'olo olit na. Olo'acotip bet dus e'shohona iyat poren'tas!

Raelametanashi! My dear, the fox needs you, the cub is in the pond and cannot swim!

Thanks

This book has been a labor of love. Rooted in my own personal struggles with feeling never good enough and my own tendencies to quit when things seem impossible, I wrote the truthchimes I have been taught over the years, and have tried to seed deep in my soul. I'm not perfect, but I'm still trying (insert hat-tip to Killian).

A thousand thanks to Sara Lawson, who did all the layers of editing to such great success. I'm so grateful for your insight and your commas and your em dashes. You are a fantastic editor and wonderful friend.

To Constance, my better author half, who the Once Upon a Prince series has so heavily depended, you are glorious and a friend I am grateful for daily. You keep me organized and less frenetic and finishing well. I'm so glad we are such a complimentary pairing. Thank you for alpha/beta/...gamma? reading things with me to make my books shine.

To Jacque, Becky, and Celeste, thank you for your early insight into the book and adding such richness and depth to the characters, their growth, and helping me cut the things that weren't working and expand on the things that needed more life. This book is a thousand times better for your input.

To my Advanced Reader Team who caught the last sneaky letters and commas and periods that always slip through to keep authors up at night, THANK YOU. Thank you for reading my book, and for helping me polish it to be ready for release to the world. You are worth your weight in gold. If you, too, gentle reader, want to read early copies, please sign up for my newsletter on my website, Aloracarter.com!

To Moorbooks who made such fantastic covers, and cohesive branding. You did such a fantastic job with every detail.

And thank you as always to God who loved me relentlessly, endured suffering with perseverance, fought through hell for me to be with me, and who is actually perfect. You are the root of all the good things in my life, and the restorer of my broken state. Thank you for constantly teaching me through truth, and giving my my own sarcastic, loving friends that have guided me back to your wisdom.

About the Author



Alora Carter is a native Coloradan sun-child who would rather be lost in a forest than adulting. She has two vibrant littles and a handsome viking-esque husband, as well as two wild German Shorthaired Pointers, a frog and four-foot corn snake named Sancho. Not to mention the chickens, pheasants or pigeons. Currently thriving in the lake lands of the mid-west, she finds herself through writing fantasy that sprinkles in cool science alongside themes of endurance in hardship, love conquers all, found family and growing the hidden potential in us all.

She began writing amidst the Pandemic in fall of 2021 and finished May 2022 with her first draft. Working nearly full-time and mothering full-time means she sneaks in minutes and hours to write and work on the next novel. She loves the imaginative human soul and hopes someone feels and grows with her along the way.

Spoiler alert: Good wins and love conquers all, even if it might not look like it at the time.

Website: www.AloraCarter.com

Facebook at www.facebook.com/AuthorAloraCarter

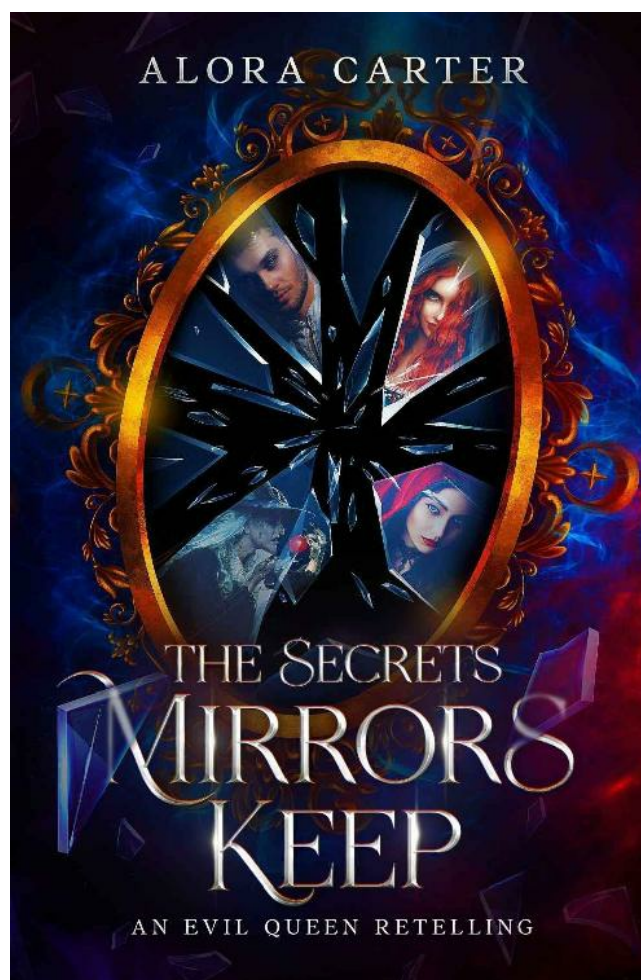
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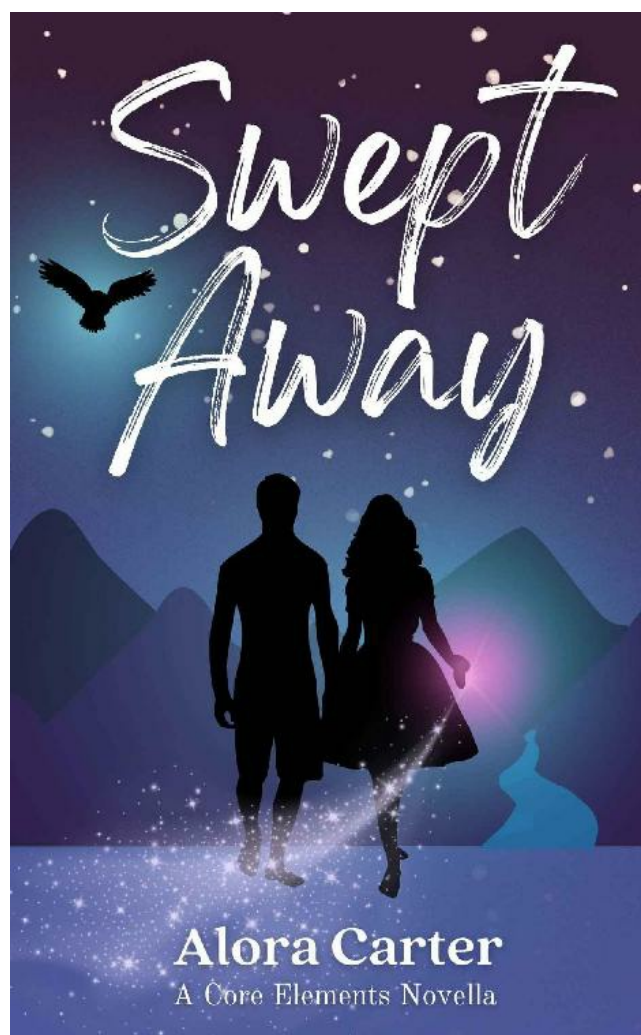
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